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# The Effect of Gender and Racial Stereotypes and Education-related Beliefs on the Academic and Social Identity Development of Urban African American Girls

Wanda Marie Shealey

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THE EFFECT OF GENDER AND RACIAL STEREOTYPES AND EDUCATION-  
RELATED BELIEFS ON THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL IDENTITY  
DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS

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at the

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of  
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Learning and Development

This Dissertation has been approved for the  
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**November 27, 2018**  
Student's Date of Defense

## DEDICATION

*Mommy: Girl, I look at you now with the same amazement that I looked at you back then. I wear your face and I thank God that I have your heart! Your love keeps me brave.*



*Daddy: When I was learning to walk, you took me by my hands and said, "Come on, Shortie, I ain't go let you go!" You've been gone now 11 years and Old Man, you still holdin' my hands. Which is to say you always keep your promises. And finishing this study is me keeping my promise to you.*



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Finally, I can’t thank Dr. Gosselin enough for serving on my committee. I first learned about Black feminist theory and history from you. And here we are again, nearly twenty years later, and it is only fitting that I end my academic degree journey with the person that I began with! Gwendolyn Brooks said it best, “We are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.” Thank you for sharing this experience with me.

**THE EFFECT OF GENDER AND RACIAL STEREOTYPES AND EDUCATION-  
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DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS**

**WANDA M. SHEALEY**

**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative, ethnographic study explores various tensions and struggles around gender and racial stereotypes that three urban teenage African American girls encounter as they try to develop a sense of oneself as an individual and in relation to the world. The purpose of this study was to explore Black high school girls' experiences in a predominately urban public school in the Midwest. This study is guided by the following research question: *In what way do gender and racial bias contribute to the self-perception of African American adolescent girls?* Interrogating the multiple standpoints that inform African American female identity and how these multiple perspectives are moderated not only by gender, race, and socioeconomic status, but also by ability and classroom context and their role in influencing academic achievement this study is guided by three sub-questions:

1. How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their in-school identities?
2. How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their out-of- school identities?
3. What are the tools and strategies Black girls use to resist intersecting oppressions in order to persist in these environments?

The research design included autoethnographic vignettes, individual interviews (audio), autobiographies and field notes. I conducted four individual interviews with each of the participants in the study.

The findings showed that Black girls in predominately urban educational settings are heavily marginalized and both structurally and individually experience various forms of oppression related to race, gender and class inequity. Girls in those settings employ various tactics related to relationships, parental support, social activities, and Black identity as a way to resist oppressions as well as survive in these spaces. Girls display a diverse set of experiences in schools, and use a range of strategies to persist, which illustrates the heterogeneity of the Black girls' experience and the need for continued study of their experiences in schools.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **My Story**

My interest in the intersections of schooling, identity development and urban African American teen girls is rooted in my own experiences as an African American girl growing up in inner city Cleveland, Ohio. At times, I felt enormously loved and at other times, I felt immensely lonely. When I was seventeen, I remember being captivated by the worst behaved boys in school. I loved to laugh, talk on the telephone, and eat whatever unhealthy food I could find. I remember listening to the latest music and rushing home from school to watch MTV, BET and The Jerry Springer show. I remember singing, NWA's "Fuck the Police," Dancehall singer's Mad Cobra's "Flex (*it's time to have sex*) and Levert's "Baby I'm Ready." I was not sexually active; however, my love of poetry, fiction and the performing arts, thanks to my 9<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, Mrs. Zybol, kept my imagination quite busy.

Of love and my family, there is much to be written. I grew up in a close-knit two-parent household with two brothers. My dad was a custodian at a suburban library, and my mom was a homemaker who worked off and on as a hospital housekeeper. I

remember during the Reagan years, my mom and dad would go to the neighborhood Hunger Centers to get free groceries for our family when during the end of the month both money and food were running low. Our living arrangements were very similar to the fictional African American sitcom, “Good Times.” We lived upstairs in a two-bedroom two family house. My parents had one bedroom and I occupied the other bedroom. At night, our living room sofa bed served as my two brothers’ bedroom. Our mealtimes were more like the fictional Cosby Show. Except for my dad, we all sat at the dinner table to eat and discussed the theater of our day. I had cousins who got into fights both in and out of school. I never mastered the art of fist fighting; but was taught to never run. So, while I did not get into physical altercations, I never had a problem standing up for myself and was subsequently well versed in the rhetorical art of cursing someone out.

In my neighborhood, and within my extended family, I knew people who used drugs, sold drugs and were subsequently destroyed by the illegal drug trade. I knew too many brothers, “who age[d] in hood years...where one night ...equal[ed] the rest of [their] life” (Perdomo, 2001). Too many sisters forced into a life of sexual drudgery also surrounded me and who now, as we now approach our 40<sup>th</sup> birthdays, spend their days in a state of perpetual amnesia because to remember would mean to relive a chronic pain for which there is no cure. I also know men and women who have made a career out of being in and out of prison. Because I am a part of all of these people and they being a part of me, I can say without fear or shame that mine was an extremely happy and satisfying childhood.

Unfortunately, because I grew up in the heart of inner city Cleveland in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood, there are those scholars who would view my growth and



development through a pathological theoretical lens. They would render me as an angry, hypersexual, at-risk, and perhaps even as an academically low performing, inner city Black girl, because after all, I did earn C's and D's in math. However, there is a complex person with a rich narrative behind every story, and therefore, researchers must move beyond biases of what it means to grow-up as a Poor. Black. Female.

### **Statement of the Problem**

More African American girls complete high school than African American boys; however, Black girls are rewarded not for being smart but for being “good” and “trying hard” (Jones, 2009). Too often scholars who examine the intersections of schooling, academics and inner-city African American girls focus exclusively on established notions of African American femaleness and more particularly how these stereotypes are manifested within popular youth culture. For instance, in her study with urban Black girls, Jones (2009) identifies two types of poor and working-class African American females, “good girls” and “ghetto girls.” In her paradigm, “good girls” are those urban African American girls who subscribe to both external mainstream notions of womanhood, most notably European American notions of femininity and internal middle-class African American notions of ladylike respectability (Jones, 2009). Conversely, “ghetto girls,” are those urban African American girls who submit to neither mainstream White American feminine values nor middle-class Black American ideas of womanhood (Jones, 2009). However, the present study takes issue with such one-sided notions for how poor and working-class African American girls develop a sense of self. Judging from my own experiences and those of my peers, I argue that urban African American girls do not fit neatly into either/or paradigms, in fact no one does. Reducing inner-city African American girls to such constraining categories belittles their humanity and does

not allow for the complexities of their lives. Instead, as I argue here, the two seemingly different paradigms often intersect within the lives of urban Black girls. What's more, the "good girl" and "ghetto girl" categories are often both/and models in urban Black girls' journey towards selfhood. To be sure, neither prototype reflects some obsolete racist and misogynistic morality assessment by which African American women have been unfairly judged since the days of their enslavement and ensuing sexual exploitation by their White slave owners. Yet, current research frequently reduce urban African American girls to their socio-economic status, what is believed to be their ethos of pathology, most notably in hip-hop culture.

For instance, contemporary feminist scholars have examined how hip-hop culture serves as both sites of oppression and sometimes sites of possibilities for young urban Black girls in their journey of self-discovery (Brown, 2009; Pough, 2002; Richardson, 2006; Stephens & Few, 2009a; Stephens & Few, 2009b; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). However, too often, these scholars, in their attempt to theorize a hip-hop feminist pedagogy, have wrongly credited hip hop culture with either initiating working-class African American female consciousness or further rendering the Black female voice silent. Such an interpretation is a historical misreading of working-class African American female subjectivity. As Davis (1998) makes clear in her seminal work on early 20<sup>th</sup> century African American female blues singers, there is an "unacknowledged tradition of feminist consciousness in working-class [B]lack communities that emerged through the recorded performances of pre-World War II African American female blues singers" (pg. ix).

Traditionally, Black feminist literature has been replete with studies emphasizing how hip-hop culture exploits urban African American girls and possibly contributes to

their low self-worth and academic failure (Miller, 2008; Townsend, Neilands, Thomas, & Jackson, 2010). However, this reading of how poor and working-class Black girls interpret and respond to hip-hop may be steeped in class biases and one-sided notions of what it means to be “the right type of Black girl.” For instance, Davis (1998) posits that,

While an impressive body of literature establishing historical antecedents for contemporary black feminism has been produced during the last two decades, there remains a paucity of research on the class-inflected character of historical black feminism... To a large extent...what are constituted as black feminist traditions tend to exclude ideas produced by women within poor and working-class communities, where women historically have not had the means or access to publish written texts (xi-xii).

Similar to hip hop culture, Davis (1998) concedes that the blues genre was not without its contradictions regarding African American female individuality. African American female blues performers such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, much like contemporary African American female hip-hop artist, namely Lil Kim, Foxxxy Brown and Nicki Minaj, often both subscribed to and rebelled against Black Male Privilege that is pervasive within both musical genres and certainly within the larger Black community. Thus, the study of urban African American girls academic achievement or lack thereof and their subsequent identity formation, requires a more fine-tuned and liminal appraisal; an approach that examines the totality of urban African American female growth and development. Put another way, “...feminism is complicated...theory [is] a blueprint, but it often fails as a compass (Foster, 2014). Indeed, Foster reminds us that,

We must encourage subversion of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, but that should not happen without acknowledgment that Black women must not only survive but find joy while navigating this world in our assaulted bodies. Grappling with these things that are often placed in conflict necessitates nuanced discussions of our lives and work. (n.p.)

For this reason, this study makes no judgment as to what constitutes a “good Black girl” or a “ghetto Black girl.” Such thinking has its roots in White male idealization of White women as weak, innocent and virtuous, while at the same time subjecting enslaved Black women to mass sexual and physical exploitation. In the patriarchal model, the exploitation of Black women is possible not only because she is amoral and strong enough to endure the abuse but also because Black men are somehow weak and unable or perhaps even unwilling to protect her (Omolade, 1994).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore Black high school girls’ experiences in a predominately urban public school in the Midwest. As the recent National Women’s Law Center (2014) study highlights the in-school success rate of Black teenage girls is dismal. According to the study, stereotypes of Black girls and women as ‘angry’ or aggressive, and ‘promiscuous’ or hyper-sexualized can shape school officials’ views of black girls in critically harmful ways. For instance, Black girls are 5.5 times more likely to be suspended than White girls are, the report found, and they are more likely to receive multiple suspensions than any other gender or race of students. Also detrimental, they point out, is that the implicit biases can lead to the setting of lower academic expectations for Black girls, including an increased risk of repeating a grade. The report’s authors also noted that Black girl are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, which often have fewer experienced teachers and guidance counselors and more law enforcement officers.

Given these facts, new policies and practices must be implemented with the academic well-being of African American girls at the center.

## **Research Questions**

The following research question guided this study: *In what way do gender and racial bias contribute to the self-perception of African American adolescent girls?*

Interrogating the multiple standpoints that inform African American female identity and how these multiple perspectives are moderated not only by gender, race, and socioeconomic status, but also by ability and classroom context and their role in influencing academic achievement this study is guided three sub-questions:

1. How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their in-school identities?
2. How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their out-of-school identities?
3. What are the tools and strategies Black girls use to resist intersecting oppressions in order to persist in these environments?

## **Significance of the Study**

African American adolescent girls from poor and working-class backgrounds are at risk for being left behind both in school and in life (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Peller, 2016; Evans-Winter, 2005; Morris, 2007; 2012; 2016; National Women's Law Center, 2007; 2014; Rollack, 2007; Taylor, 2012). However, what has not been revealed are the stories behind the dismal numbers. Hearing the voice of urban African American high school girls as they explore issues related to Black culture and their femaleness can help infuse much needed scholarship on the intersections of race, power, and learning into K-12 educational scholarship. Moreover, this study can assist scholars in understanding some of the tensions and struggles African American girls experience while learning in traditional literacy contexts that are constructed upon narrow notions of literacy.

## **Conceptual Frame**

Drawing on autoethnographic fieldwork to examine my own growth and development as an urban African American adolescent girl and then relying on narrative analysis to assess how contemporary inner-city African American teen girls advance towards autonomy; this study explored the ways in which the school functions as a key cultural space for examining African American girl's resistance and identity formation. Merging feminist narratology, autoethnography, Black feminist pedagogy and Black feminist thought, this study sought to advance Black feminist autoethnography as a theoretical and methodological means to critically tell the stories of African American teen girl's lives within the field of education.

## **Feminist Narratology, Autoethnography, Black Feminist Pedagogy and Black Feminist Thought**

In contrast to structuralist narratology, feminist narratology, which emerged in the 1980s as one of the first 'postclassical,' context-oriented approaches within narrative theory and was pioneered by Lanser (2010), is based on the assumption that gender is a category that is relevant to the analysis of the structural features of narratives. Seeking to link feminist theory and narratology, this branch of narrative theory has revealed blind spots and pitfalls of the supposedly gender-neutral analyses of structuralist narratology. Moreover, feminist narratology has sought to relate textual features to relevant cultural contexts and has modified and reinterpreted narratological categories from a women centered perspective.

According to Boylorn and Orbe (2014), autoethnography "refers to both the method and product of researching and writing about personal lived experiences and their relationship to culture" (pp. 16-17). Autoethnography allows the researcher to look both



inward at the self, “while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur” (as cited in Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 17).

Griffin (2012) argues that,

As a methodology positioned to embrace subjectivity, engage critical self-reflexivity, speak rather than being spoken for, interrogate power, and resist oppression, autoethnography can be productively coupled with Black feminist thought for Black female scholars to “look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 143).

This research project creates the background to study myself as a professional through the prism of my personal life. Autoethnography as a form of qualitative research makes it possible to contemplate my own life and professional experience as the secondary foci of the investigation. Autoethnographers can dissect and analyze their own lives more thoroughly than any other researcher as they possess the information on the events of their lives that others have no access to. The reflections on the stories from my professional life are the means to explore, analyze and comprehend educational problems professional African American women from working-class socioeconomic backgrounds encounter in their journey to professional accomplishments.

The fieldwork of this study includes the narratives of three self-identified African American teen girls as well as my own life as an urban African American teen girl. I also analyze my professional experience in the two different settings: private, working-class vs. professional, middle-class. My personal life is inseparable from my professional life concerning who I am as a person because it defines who I am as an educator. Thus, within an educational context, a Black feminist autoethnography approach aligns with Omolade’s (1994) vision of Black feminist pedagogy in that, “it offers the student, instructor, and institution a methodology for promoting equality and multiple visions and

perspectives that parallel Black women's attempts to be and become recognized as human beings and citizens rather than as objects and victims." (pg. 129)

Certainly, Black feminist pedagogy,

"...is not merely concerned with the principles of instruction of Black women by Black women and about Black women; it also sets forth learning strategies informed by Black women's historical experience with race/gender/class bias and the consequences of marginality and isolation" (Omalade, 1994, p. 129).

Echoing Omalade, Collins (2009) provides a roadmap for how to merge Black feminist pedagogy, Black feminist thought and autoethnography. She explains that, "Black feminist thought must both be tied to Black women's lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion" (p. 35). Therefore, when examining the concerns of Black women, Collins (1998) endorses the concept of intersectionality, noting that

"[i]ntersectionality ... highlights how African American women and other social groups are positioned within unjust power relations, but it does so in a way that introduces added complexity to formerly race-, class-, and gender-only approaches to social phenomena." (pp. 205)

To be sure, Collins does not promote the privileging of individual concerns over more systemic analysis. Instead, she seeks to work with both the notion of a shared standpoint and the notion of intersectionality to develop a highly nuanced and specific model for Black feminist theory. In this context, intersectionality "provides an interpretive framework for thinking through how intersections of race and class, or race and gender, or sexuality and class, for example, shape any group's experience across specific social contexts", (pp. 208) without necessarily forming unvaried guidelines for social structure. It is also important, as Collins notes, to develop a contextual and specific analysis of each group with a view to theorizing hierarchies of intersectionality, such that various oppressions are not deemed to be equivalent.



One way of understanding intersectionality is through Joanne Kilgour Dowdy's (2002) retelling of her own experiences as an Afro-Trinidadian adolescent who struggled to come to terms with her multiple identities. Dowdy, who immigrated to the United States, describes growing up in Trinidad where she spoke British English to succeed in school and gain her mother's approval, yet felt separated from her peers and her inner Trinidadian self. She writes about the tension among her various discourses, which were tied up in these two dialects or linguistic codes, and how, through acting, she gives her Trinidadian self-credibility and acceptance. It is in this regard that the delicate distinctions of intersectionality are appreciated. In order to accurately understand Dowdy, one would need to move beyond a classic reading of the entanglement of race, gender, and class, but also become versed in the politics of colonialism as well as the effects that the system had and continues to have on those that were once subjugated. Indeed, Dowdy's struggle with the conflicting loyalties that colonialism creates echoes the sentiments of the Afro-Barbados poet, Derek Walcott when in his 1962 poem, "A Far Cry from Black," he ponders:

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
Between this Black and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I turn from Black and live?

Forty years later Dowdy eloquently answered Walcott and in fact, all of those who struggle with giving equal measure to their native ancestry, colonial heritage and the resulting hybrid cultures created by the merger of both. Informing readers that one must not be forced to divide any part of their soul she writes, "Let the Head girl be a proud Masai and the cricketer hit the ball beyond the boundary ovuh dyuh" (p. 13). In the

aforementioned sentence Dowdy at once embraces her African heritage (proud Masai), her colonial British heritage (the cricketer) and finally, the hybrid discourse that was birthed by the blending of both cultures (ovuh dyuh). What's more, by placing her esteemed African adolescent girl directly in the public sphere as a "Head girl" who is a master at sports, Dowdy suggests a more multifaceted way of viewing Black girlhood in general; one that is not contingent upon traditional one-sided views that dictate Black female in-school behavior.

When interpreted within the conceptual frame of intersectionality, Dowdy's (2002) story reminds readers that the plurality and complexity of human circumstances must be acknowledged. It is for this reason that Collins (1998) notes the usefulness of a meso-level analysis, in that it can take account both of individual Black women's histories, as well as access to a historically created and shared "Black feminist wisdom." Thus, Collins (1998) is interested in analyses, which develop and emerge from, rather than simplify and/or suppress the complexities of Black women's experiences as both individuals and members of a group. As she observes

"Such a standpoint would identify the ways in which being situated in intersections of [various structural and personal characteristics] ... constructs relationships among African American women as a group. At the same time, a situated standpoint would reflect how these intersections frame African American women's distinctive history as a collectivity in the United States." (p. 228)

### **Definition of Terms**

The following list of terms and operational definitions provide clarification:

*Black/African American:* For the purpose of this study, the terms Black and African American are used interchangeably and refer to the descendants of enslaved Black people who are from the United States.

*Black Male Privilege:* Woods (2008) defines Black Male Privilege, “as aspects of Black men’s lives that [Black men themselves] take for granted, which appear to be “double standards,” but in fact are male privileges that come at the expense of women in general and African American women in particular.

*Colorism:* Discrimination based on skin complexion.

*Emoji:* Emojis are ideograms and smileys used in electronic messages and web pages. Emoji exist in various genres, including facial expressions, common objects, places and types of weather, and animals.

*Misogynoir:* According to Bailey and Trudy (2018) “misogynoir” refers to anti-black misogyny, where race and gender together are factors in the hatred of Black women. Bailey and Trudy created the term to address misogyny directed toward Black women in American visual and popular culture.

*Racial Microaggression:* A social exchange in which a member of a dominant culture says or does something, often by accident, which belittles and alienates a member of a marginalized group. The term was invented in 1970 by psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Chester M. Pierce to describe insults and dismissals he said he had regularly witnessed non-Black Americans inflict on Black people (Lewis, Mendenhall, & Harwood, 2013).

*In-school Identity:* For the purposes of this study, the researcher defines in-school identity as the comportment that students exhibit in the presence of school personnel.

*Out-of-school Identity:* For the purpose of this study, the researcher defines out-of-school identity as the comportment that students exhibit among their peers and is less formal and more relaxed than their behavior school faculty and staff.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **CONCEPTUAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Four interrelated areas of research help contextualize this study: 1) racism in education, 2) literacy practices among Black female adolescents, 3) culturally responsive pedagogy, and finally, 4) racial identity and achievement. In the following paragraph, I explain how each of these areas of literature relates to the current study.

It was important to consult the literature on racism in education because the questions at the core of this study mirror those that critical race theorists in education ask in terms of examining how issues of race, power and privilege operate in mainstream classrooms and how these forces influence classroom dynamics specifically, how teachers teach and how student learn or do not learn. Next, I turned to the literature on literacy practices among African American female adolescents. This body of literature helps lay the intellectual foundation for understanding some of the tensions and struggles Black girls experience in classrooms that are not necessarily constructed with their learning styles in mind. The next literature that was consulted is research on culturally responsive pedagogy. This body of literature provides an educational philosophy for developing a program specific to urban African American students. Following that, I surveyed the literature on racial identity and academic achievement motivation. This

literature is important because it provides the necessary context for understanding key factors that influence the classroom behavior and performance of African Americans.

### **Racism in Education**

Much of contemporary scholarship on how the U.S. educational system negatively impacts African Americans owe an intellectual debt to Black scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson. In fact, Woodson's *The Mis-education of the Negro* (1933) was one of the first scholarly examinations to deal exclusively with how racism in the American educational system affects African Americans. In Woodson's estimation, Black Americans of his day were not being taught in school but rather culturally indoctrinated to occupy inferior positions within American society.

Thirty years later, James Baldwin (1963) delivered a speech entitled, *The Negro child—his self-image*. According to Baldwin, the urban public-school system psychologically shatters African American students. In Baldwin's words, "...it becomes thoroughly clear, at least to me, that any Negro who is born in this country and undergoes the American educational system runs the risk of becoming schizophrenic" (p. 2). This psychosis occurs, according to Baldwin, because of "biased curriculum and racist pedagogy; programs of study, which teach that only Europeans and White Americans have achieved greatness while Africans and African Americans, are reduced to footnotes in history with tales of degradation and servitude" (p. 2).

In the past decade, there has been an increase in the number of studies in the field of education that use critical race theory as an analytical framework. Prior to this influx, critical race theorists came primarily from the legal field (Crenshaw; et al, 1995). These theorists argue that although legally sanctioned racism has been abolished, everyday and

often hidden racism has risen. One of the primary lines of inquiry that critical race scholars in education have pursued has to do with examining the ways in which White teachers are implicated in reproducing notions of White supremacy at the expense of students of color in the classroom. For instance, Milner (2012) argues that well-meaning White teachers who lack self-reflection often have a hard time recognizing how their own racial and class biases become reproduced in their curriculum and teaching, this is particularly true of teachers who claim not to see color in the classroom and operate on a “color blind” philosophy. Instead, Milner (2012) insists that these teachers must recognize racial and ethnic differences in the classroom in order make the realities of students of color visible and thus valid.

Watson (2012) makes a similar point in that teachers of urban students often use White suburbia as the norm and speak pejoratively—though unintentionally—about urban students. What is disturbing about this mode of thinking is that these teachers view non-mainstream non-White culture as “the other;” that is something different and therefore less desirable and thus, by extension both their students and their students’ families need “fixing,” are fundamentally flawed, and lacking in humanity. Yet, as Baldwin (1997) reminds us in his essay *If Black English isn’t a language, then tell me, what is?*, “[a] child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him.”

Although they might not classify their work under the heading “critical race theory,” contemporary African American educators have also written about racism in the context of teaching and learning. For example, in her book, *Other people’s children*, Delpit (2006), connects how power imbalances and cultural conflicts within classrooms

occur within a larger society that, “nurtures and maintains stereotypes (p. xii).” Delpit writes,

Indeed, in the educational institutions of this country, the possibilities for poor people and for people of color to define themselves, to determine the self each should be, involve a power that lies outside of the self. It is others who determine how they should act, how they are to be judged. When one “we” gets to determine standards for all “wes,” then some “wes” are in trouble! (p. xv)

Both Howard (2010) and Tatum (2005) make similar arguments regarding the need to dismantle one-sided cultural notions so that the racial achievement gap in America’s classrooms can be closed.

Another relatively new branch of research in the field of education that is similar to critical race theory in its assessment of power and privilege as it relates to race is the study of whiteness as a theoretical framework. Unlike critical race scholars however, whiteness theorists concern themselves primarily with investigating the cultural, historical and sociological aspects of people identified as White, and the social construction of whiteness as an ideology tied to social status. One reason why white supremacy continues to be an issue in K-12 classrooms is due to the crippling guilt and shame over past and current racism in society that often confounds White teachers. For example, in a study by Case and Hemmings (2005) of White women pre-service teachers enrolled in a workshop to talk about racism, the White women distanced themselves through strategies of silence, social disassociation, and separation from responsibility instead of fully engaging in the workshop. They used these strategies in response to perceptions that they were being positioned as racist, directly implicated in institutional racism, or responsible for racial discrimination. Similar to Milner’s (2012) critique of



“color-blind” teachers, the teachers in Case and Hemmings’ (2005) study seem to believe that if racism is not discussed then it does not exist.

### **Literacy Practices among African American Female Adolescents**

During the mid-nineteenth century a shift occurred in how young middle-class White Victorian women saw themselves in large part due to their increased enrollment in coeducational schools (Hunter & Hunter, 2002). The pursuit of learning brought these girls into the public sphere where they enjoyed new found independence and equality with their male counterparts coupled with experiences of fun and frivolity. Accordingly, Hunter and Hunter attributes these experiences to the initial stages of American female adolescence.

Though constrained by legal racism and grotesque images of themselves in both scientific and popular discourse (Gould, 1996), young late nineteenth century Black women also embraced greater opportunities for learning however, the recreational aspects of schooling that their European American female counterparts enjoyed were tempered by an urgent sense of social activism (Glass 2005). Perhaps as an attempt to counter racist notions about African American womanhood, the Black community fully embraced the concept of “true womanhood” that was the norm in Victorian society. However, as Carlson (1992) notes,

African Americans supplemented the Eurocentric concept of womanhood with qualities that their own community valued. Most notably, the Black Victorian woman was sophisticated and well-educated and had a strong sense of community and dedication for advocating on behalf of African Americans’ civil rights (p. 62).

Furthermore, while White nineteenth-century middle-class women were relegated to the domestic sphere, her Black counterparts were not. Indeed, chattel slavery forced African



American women to work alongside African American men while at the same time rearing her children and attending to the needs and concerns of her husband. Thus, historically, for Black women the dual role as both public and private caretaker was accepted and encouraged long after slavery ended. All of these qualities were exemplified in the late nineteenth century educators, activists, and staunch advocates for the education of the Black girl child, Anna Julia Cooper (Glass, 2005).

Long before Du Bois (1935) wrote about the perceived “Negro problem,” Cooper had already raised the question of, “problematized existence and analyzed the notion of a ‘race problem’ ” in her groundbreaking collection of essay, *A Voice from the South* (as cited in Johnson, 2013, pg. 30). Describing her own calling as “the education of neglected people,” Cooper saw education, and specifically higher education, as the means of African American women’s advancement. She believed “that intellectual development, with the self-reliance and capacity for earning a livelihood which it gives,” would supersede any need for dependence on men, allowing women to extend their horizons and have their “sympathies... broadened and deepened and multiplied.” Cooper began at M Street School as a math and science teacher, and was promoted to principal in 1902. With her firm resolve in education as tantamount to the progress of people of color, Cooper rejected her white supervisor’s mandate to teach her students trades, and instead trained and prepared them for college. Cooper sent her students to prestigious universities and attained accreditation for M Street School from Harvard, but her success was received with hostility rather than celebration from a power structure that was not necessarily interested in the advancement of African American youth. Still, Cooper

persevered and as Moore (2013) reminds us, across six decades of her work, Cooper helped to lay the foundation of modern-day race and gender studies.

It is this rich educational legacy that contemporary young Black women have as a foundation and although understudied, African American feminist scholars have been determined to unearth this tradition and link it to current Black female literacy practices both inside and outside of the classroom.

For example, Richardson (2003) explores the complexity of African American literacies, paying particular attention to African American female literacies in the domains of families, communities, popular culture, and schools. Building on Jacqueline Royster's (1990) work on educated nineteenth century African American women who used essay writing as a tool for political, social and cultural change, Richardson (2003) moves beyond the traditional definition of literacies as knowing how to read and write and instead offers a more holistic approach when describing Black female pedagogical sensibilities as, "ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society" (p. 77). Such practices include storytelling, conscious manipulation of speech and silence; code and/or style switching; signifying; and the performance arts (singing, dancing, acting, steppin', stylin' and quilting, and other crafts).

Richardson (2003) argues that the Black woman has had to develop critical literacy and language practices to "fulfill [her] quest for a better world" and to counteract and resist dominant cultural stereotypes. Thus, the mother tongue concept, and understanding its significance as a cultural and social phenomenon, is essential to

understanding African American students and their literacy education. The mother tongue concept connects language to identity. It is usually learning from our mothers; we speak their “native” language, thus their mother tongue. Richardson explains the concept this way:

[O]ur language, our mother tongue, is at least partly how we know what we know. Every language represents a particular way of making sense of the world. As contextual factors in our realities change, our language changes to accommodate our world/view. Non-standard languages typically change faster than standard ones because they are not authorized in larger society or carefully written down (Gee, 1996). Nevertheless, various nuances and ideas are descended in those languages that reflect a past and help to shape the future of the language user. (p. 75)

Richardson goes on to argue that formal schooling erases individual identities and creates conflicting views of reality among African American women that need to be codified and verified to help these women successfully across borders. “Making explicit some of the literacies of Black females can help educators to build on that foundation” (p. 76).

Unfortunately, in classrooms the literacies of Black girls have often been used against them. According to Grant (1994), the teacher to assume a “Mammy” type caregiver role in an effort to help the teacher maintain classroom control positions too often elementary school-aged African American girls. Richardson (2003) makes a similar point noting that Black females are socialized to act as protectors, nurturers, and independent individuals however, in the classroom these strengths are sometimes negatively exploited by teachers who emphasize socialization over academics. These values often play out in the classroom as early as the first and second grade as Black females students become “messengers,” “caretakers,” and “enforcers” (Grant, 1994). Long term, these roles can negatively affect Black girls, particularly by the time they enter middle and high school. A shift seems to occur and teachers begin to associate

African American girls' behavior with being unladylike or "too adult like" (Morris, 2007) resulting in Black girls being more frequently and more severely punished in school than their White and Latina counterparts (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011).

What teachers and school administrators often view as "ladylike behavior" are those qualities more closely—and quite stereotypically—associated with middle-class White womanhood (e.g. quiet, reserved and acquiescing). Conversely, urban Black girls are considered too loud or as Morris (2007) term them "loudies" as opposed to "ladies." Teachers often discourage behavior by African American female students—particularly Black girls in inner-city classroom settings—that could lead to educational success such as speaking up in class. African American girls, unlike White girls, and girls from other ethnic groups, do not retreat to silence and lower self-esteem in the classroom when they reach adolescence (Adams, 2010). To the contrary, Black girls often dominate classroom discussions and frequently relish classroom competition (Morris, 2007).

Ironically, instead of cultivating these desirable qualities in Black girls many African American female teachers—in much the same ways as White teachers—either punish or overcorrect Black girl's classroom behavior sometimes to point of neglecting the girls' academic strivings (Morris, 2007). This is not surprising since African American women are intimately aware of the stereotypes that exist about them especially for those Black women who go against the grain of societal acceptability; this is especially true for African American women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, those same late Victorian qualities that educated middle-class African Americans embraced to initially counter anti-Black female racism continue with middle-class

African American school teachers. Hence, class in combination with race and gender work in tandem to thwart inner city Black girls' in-school success.

To be sure, class prejudice within the Black community provides a lucid lens for examining some African American teacher's focus on Black girls' behavior however, there exists within African American culture the concept of "Othermothering" that may provide a more nuanced appraisal of the Black female teacher/Black female student relationship. Case (1997) defines Othermothering as, "African American women's maternal assistance offered to the children of blood mothers within the African American community. Originally traced to slavery, Othermothering was a survival mechanism that served as a vehicle for educational and cultural transmission." (p. 25) The Othermothering concept provides further clarity as to why Black female teachers censure what they perceive to be African American girls' incorrect behavior in that they may possibly view their function in the classroom as both teacher and Othermother. As Hill Collins points out, "In raising their daughters, Black mothers face a troubling dilemma. To ensure their daughter's physical survival, they must teach their daughters to fit into systems of oppression" (as cited in Turnage, 2004, p. 157). Here, I am reminded of Alice Walker's (1983) essay, *In search of our mother's garden*, where she ponders, "How was the creativity of the Black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years Black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a Black person to read or write?" (p. 234). Such women, Walker theorizes, suffered from "contrary instincts ... [h]er loyalties were completely divided, as was, without question, her mind" (p. 235-36). My point here is not to suggest that African American women are psychologically impaired, but rather to highlight how

tradition in harmony with racism, sexism and classism operate inside and outside of the classroom to impinge upon the self-actualization of African American women and girls.

African American mothers across the socioeconomic spectrum have struggled with advising their daughters on the correct way of being; ways of being that are paradoxically progressive and simultaneously steeped in tradition. Take for instance, the African American feminist poet Audre Lorde's (1971) strongly worded, though anchored in sisterly love, admonishment to Toni Cade Bambara, herself a pioneering African American feminist, whose edited volume, *The Black Woman* (1970) was the first book on contemporary Black feminist theory. Celebrating both the publication of her first book and the birth of her daughter, Bambara announced that she was going to raise her "daughter to be a correct little sister." In response, Lorde warns: "raising [your] daughter up to be a correct little sister is doing your mama's job all over again... [o]ur girls will grow into their own Black Women finding their own contradictions..." (pp. 93 & 95) Echoing Lorde, Turnage (2004) explains, "The task for the African American mother is to be available to her daughter without interfering with her daughter's efforts to individuate" (p. 159).

All teachers and school administrators must be disabused of conflating urban African American female comportment with stereotypical conjectures of Black womanhood (e.g. Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel). Black girls are not White girls plus race nor are they African American plus gender. African American girls have their own complex history and ways of being and knowing. As Power Carter (2006) notes,

When educators do not take into consideration the multiple literacies that ultimately influence how students make meaning of the world around them and are part of their everyday lives and experiences, we run the risk of dismissing their academic potential and relegating them to a dismal



future that labels them as struggling, low performing, and unmotivated” (p. 357).

African American female sensibilities are rooted in long-established Black female literacies that should be cultivated and appreciated inside the classroom and beyond.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive pedagogy as teaching “to and through [students’] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments” (p. 26); culturally responsive pedagogy is premised on “close interactions among ethnic identity, cultural background, and student achievement” (p. 27). She notes further that, “Students of color come to school having already mastered many cultural skills and ways of knowing. To the extent that teaching builds on these capabilities, academic success will result” (p. 213). Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed three dimensions of culturally relevant pedagogy: holding high academic expectations and offering appropriate support such as scaffolding; acting on cultural competence by reshaping curriculum, building on students’ funds of knowledge, and establishing relationships with students and their homes; and cultivating students’ critical consciousness regarding power relations.

Another body of literature that emerged to help bolster academic achievement among Black youth is the literature on the Afrocentric idea in education (Asante, 2007). According to Molefi Asante, the Afrocentric approach to education situates African American students as the subject rather than an object of the learning experience. An African centered curricular philosophy maintains that a curriculum that presents Africans in a true light will benefit all students, not just Black students. Moreover, Afrocentric curricular theorists contend that the traditional Eurocentric school curriculum is

potentially harmful for all students because understanding the history of Africans is a key to being able to put larger world history events in their proper context (Asante, 2007).

One school that has received acclaim for its success in implementing the Afrocentric idea in education is the Betty Shabazz International Charter School. The school was founded in 1998 in Chicago, Illinois by Dr. Carol D. Lee, Haki Madhubuti, Robert J. Dale, Soyini Walton, and Anthony Daniels-Halisi (see school website at <http://www.bsics.net> ). Betty Shabbazz International Charter School has been lauded for its ability to balance culturally centered curricula while still helping students perform well on state standardized tests.

Afrocentric curriculum theorists have identified a set of principles and ideas that help clarify what constitutes the Afrocentric idea in education. According to Giddings (2001), an Afrocentric curriculum would strive toward the following five goals:

1. Assist students in developing the necessary intellectual, moral and emotional skills for accomplishing a productive, affirming life in society.
2. Provide such educational instruction as to deconstruct established hegemonic pillars and to safeguard against the construction of new ones.
3. Provide students of African descent with educational techniques that are in accord with their learning styles.
4. Assist students of African descent in maintaining a positive self-concept, with a goal of achieving a sense of collective accountability.
5. Serve as a model for Banks (1988) “Transformational” and “Social Action” approaches to education. (p. 463)

These five principles illustrate the need to help students of color to bridge the ‘cultural dissonances’ (King, 1991) that they often experience between school and home, which hinder their academic success.



However, the Afrocentric model is not without its critics. For instance, Hill Collins (1998) finds the paradigm specious because in theory, the model purports to make visible the contributions of all Black people that have been historically hidden because of a white supremacist agenda. However, upon closer examination it becomes clear that the “Black people” that many Afrocentric thinkers are primarily concerned with are Black men. For this reason, Hill Collins argues that Afrocentrism, because of its male-centered focus, undermines the contributions of Black women. Afrocentrism also works to silence those Black women who do not fit into “the Black woman as nurturer” paradigm that some Afrocentric theorist promote to the omission of those African American women thinkers and activist who operate outside of traditional gender roles. Worse still, Hill Collins charges that when they are not excluding Black women’s role within the community, Afrocentric academics often reduce or belittle the impact of serious minded African American female scholars. For example, she points out that despite Angela Davis work as a feminist intellectual, anti-Black racist scholar and social justice activist she has been reduced within the African American community by way of the promoters Afrocentric thinking as the woman with the big Afro. Never mind her complex political activism, Davis, through her hairstyle, is personified, in the Afrocentric imagination, as the “authentic” Black woman. Davis herself writes, ‘It is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a single generation after the events that constructed me as a public personality, I am remembered as a hairdo. It is humiliating because it reduces a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion.’ ” (as cited in Hill Collins, 1998, p. 175)

Finally, Hill Collins (1998) renders the utility of Afrocentrism ineffective for interrogating White supremacy because a great deal of Afrocentric research is grounded

in the same racist pseudo-science that it alleges to challenge. Hill Collins rightly concludes that denigrating everything European while exalting everything African without critically analyzing “complex notions of culture and society that deconstruct all binary thinking,” (p. 180) is both deceptive and dangerous.

### **Racial Identity and Achievement Motivation Development**

Racial identity refers to the attitudes an individual hold about his or her particular racial or ethnic group (Helms, 1990; Williams-Collins & Lighsey, 2001). Achievement motivation theory is one of a number of psychological theories concerning what makes people do what they do. Knowledge of this theory is useful to educators who wish to understand “the why of student achievement-related behavior rather than behavior itself” (Graham & Taylor, 2002). Theorists in the education field have turned to achievement motivation theory to better understand African American school success and failure. When achievement is measured along traditional indicators such as grades, graduation rates, success on standardized tests, and dropout numbers, African American students do not fare well when compared to their White counterparts (Howard, 2010). This gap in performance has been apparent for decades, and many have attempted to explain its causes. Early theories of motivation dominant in the 1950s and 1960s emphasized stable personality traits such as needs and cognitive dispositions as the basis for achievement motivation and performance. These theories tended to explain the gap in performance in terms of a deficit model, which suggested that African American students as a group have low achievement motivation (McClelland, 1961). Researchers working within these theoretical frameworks sought to specify the deficient nature of African American students' motivation. Some portrayed African American culture and families as

emphasizing needs other than achievement (McClelland, 1961). Others suggested that experience and circumstance fated African American students to rely on external attributions such as luck rather than on internal causes such as effort (Murray & Mednick, 1975). African American students were also perceived as having a lower sense of competence and therefore lower aspirations (Graham, 1994). In the long run, however, none of these assumptions were supported by empirical evidence.

Contemporary educational theorists have begun to examine how African American students' racial identity factors into their motivation towards academic success (Harper, 2007). For example, Fordham & Ogbu (1986) concluded that some African American students did not live up to their academic potential because of the fear of being accused of "acting white." Ogbu (2003) further echoed these findings in his book *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement* (which summarized his nine-month research on the educational gap between White and Black students in the Shaker Heights City School District located in the multi-racial, mixed income Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio). He concluded that these students' cultural attitudes hindered their own academic achievement and that, parents, educators and/or policymakers too often neglect these attitudes. Though the study's conclusions gained a popular foothold a later study obtained different results. In an 18-month study at eleven North Carolinian schools found that White and Black students have essentially the same attitudes about scholastic achievement; students in both groups want to succeed in school and show higher levels of self-esteem when they do better in school (Carter, 2006). Studies have shown that despite having lower academic achievement on average than white students, African American students are usually found to have higher self-

esteem. In fact, Black adolescent females possess higher self-esteem than any other racial or ethnic adolescent female group (van Laar, 2000). However, feeling good about oneself has not translated into greater academic gains for African Americans. It is for this reason that the present study is intent on investigating motivation as a factor in academic and social identity development for African American females.

In their review of the literature concerning gender and motivation, Meece, Anderman, and Anderman (2006), examined four contemporary theories of achievement motivation, including attribution, expectancy-value, self-efficacy, and achievement goal perspectives. They found that across all theories, the findings indicated girls' and boys' motivation-related beliefs and behaviors continue to follow gender role stereotypes. Boys report stronger ability and interest beliefs in mathematics and science, whereas girls have more confidence and interest in language arts and writing. They also identified three factors that sway girls' academic motivation: parental influence, schooling influence and socio-cultural influences. Unfortunately, very little of the literature that Meece et al, examine demonstrate how race, socioeconomic status, and other cultural influences combine with gender to shape students' social identities and learning experiences at school.

However, one of the earliest scholars to look into motivation as it relates to Black Americans, Graham (1994) reviewed close to 140 studies comprising African American empirical literature on motivation. The review was organized around five topics subsumed under three broader assumptions about the relationship between ethnic minority status and motivation. First, research on the achievement motive was reviewed to examine the belief that African Americans lack certain personality traits deemed

necessary for achievement strivings. Second, the empirical literatures on locus of control and causal attributions were summarized to investigate the assumption that African Americans are less likely to believe in internal or personal control of outcomes, the belief system that theoretically should accompany high achievement-related behavior. Third, research on expectancy of success and self-concept of ability was reviewed to examine the hypothesis that African Americans have negative self-views about their competence. None of these assumptions was supported in the review. In fact, African Americans appear to maintain a belief in personal control, have high expectancies, and enjoy positive self-regard. The popular public view that the historically poor achievement of minority students is related to low levels of motivation has not been empirically supported. Further, Graham criticized the frequent confounding of ethnicity and socioeconomic status that makes it difficult to determine which factor might be implicated in any observed differences. Still the questions linger concerning the role of motivation in school contexts, particularly reading achievement as it relates to African Americans.

Building on Graham's work as well as on the research of previous scholars, Baker and Wigfield (1999) ground their study in two theoretical positions, the engagement perspective and achievement motivation theory. The engagement perspective on reading integrates cognitive, motivational, and social aspects of reading. According to Baker and Wigfield, "[e]ngaged readers are motivated to read for different purposes, utilize knowledge gained from previous experience to generate new understandings, and participate in meaningful social interactions around reading." In conceptualizing reading motivation, they adapted constructs defined and developed by researchers in the

achievement motivation field. Currently, many motivation theorists propose that individuals' competence and efficacy beliefs, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and purposes for achievement play a crucial role in their decisions about which activities to do, how long to do them, and how much effort to put into them. Motivated readers thus will engage more in reading and will have positive attitudes toward reading. Among other factors, Baker and Wigfield examined ethnicity and family income differences in reading motivation. Their sample included urban African American and white children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The results of their study found significant correlations between a number of the 11 reading motivations they assessed and both their standardized and performance assessment measures of reading; importantly, though, the number of significant correlations differed by ethnicity, with there being more extensive relations for white American students than for African American students.

What are we to make of the mixed results regarding African American student's academic motivation? To suggest that Black students are anti-learning reeks of paternalism and yet, the studies clearly indicate that urban African American students are not closing the achievement gap with their non-Black peers. Perhaps, researchers have not asked the right questions regarding Black student achievement, particularly, how much does the curriculum itself impede on the academic motivation of inner-city African American students? Self-determination theory posits that there are three basic human needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that must be met for humans to excel. These needs match perfectly with many of the larger goals of education and may offer a more nuanced measure for evaluating the growth and development of urban African American adolescent learners. In fact, the relatedness need may provide a deeper



understanding as to why many Black students are lacking in achievement motivation: too often, the curricular content is unfamiliar to this group of students.

Culturally biased curriculum perpetuates the traditional class structure of the dominant group while high-quality curricular content is essential to good education. This claim is supported by Hill Collins (1998) own experience as a teacher when in the early 1970s she was assigned to teach a group of inner-city second grade African American students. Immediately she noticed a striking disconnect between the curriculum that she was required to teach and the reality of the majority of her students. The textbook was filled with suburban white children in situations and relationships that were alien to her students. It was through this experience that Hill Collins began to view both the Pre K-12 educational system and the curriculum as essential to the spread of hierarchical power relations by the elite but also as potential spaces for participatory democracy and oppositional knowledge. From that point forward she began using pedagogy that was grounded in social justice and collective transformation. Yet, Hill Collins' enlightenment is a rarity in many contemporary urban public schools where administrators who are forced to set forth a program of study that is more aligned with standardized achievement test scores often dictate the curriculum and instruction. Too often educators introduce external controls, close supervision and monitoring, and assessments accompanied by rewards or punishments into learning climates to ensure that learning occurs. Under such controlling conditions, however, the feelings of joy, enthusiasm, and interest that once accompanied learning are frequently replaced by experiences of anxiety, boredom, or alienation.

However, when books and other curricular materials are incorporated into lessons that speak to the needs of low-performing students the results are gratifying for both teachers and students. For instance, a study by Graff (2009) shows that when low-performing girls were allowed to select their own books for an after school remedial reading program their reading motivation increased. The seven participants, all fourth- and fifth-grade girls aged 10 and 11 years old, were situated within a “perfect storm” of reading resistance. They were (a) disconnected from school-based literacy practices, (b) eligible for free or reduced-cost school meals, (c) had limited access to reading materials outside of school, (d) school-identified as struggling readers on the basis of their latest state reading assessment performances, and (e) had scored below the 50th percentile on the Elementary Reading Attitude. They all had also professed animosity or apathy toward reading prior to the study. The girls selected books that were previously denied to them at school, representative of their peer culture, and reflective of their cultural personhood within contemporary settings. Where they once viewed reading as a laborious task by the end of the program they were reading for both information and pleasure. To be sure, these results are not limited to elementary students. In their study of one urban high school, McGaha and Igo (2012) found that when high school students were provided with free, high interest books to read over the summer their motivation to read increased profoundly.

Some of the difficulties African American youth experience in negotiating their racial identity in mainstream educational settings center around issues of language. Many African American youth speak what is known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Morgan, 2002; Richardson, 2003; Smitherman, 1977). However, the language



of power in the U.S.—or the language that carries the most social and political capital—is Standard American English (SAE). The way many African Americans and other linguistic minorities have responded to the colonization of their native tongue is to construct a bicultural linguistic identity that allows them to function in two social worlds: an official environment (e.g., school) where SAE is the norm; and an unofficial environment (e.g., home and community) where AAVE is the norm (Perry & Delpit, 1998). One of the leading anti-colonial thinkers of the 20th century, Frantz Fanon (1967) wrote extensively about the consequences of white supremacy and the suppression of non-European language on the social consciousness of Black people. Fanon believed that being colonized by a language has larger implications on one's political consciousness. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1967) wrote that, "To speak... means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (p.17-18). For him, speaking French, for example, means that one accepts, or is coerced into accepting, the collective consciousness of the French.

Each of the aforementioned areas of literature helps to situate the current study. The first area of literature on racism in education provides a context for understanding some of the struggles and tensions African American youth might experience as they negotiate their racial identity against the backdrop of Eurocentric cultural and linguistic norms while participating in classroom discussions and activities. The second area of literature on literacy practices among African American female adolescents helps contextualize the cultural and linguistic practices that African American girls might enact in school as well as the ideological stances they might take in particular discussions and inquiry activities. The third area on culturally responsive pedagogy helps make visible

the pedagogical principles that made the participants' actions and interactions around race visible. The fourth and final area of literature on racial identity and achievement motivation is relevant because it provides a necessary frame for understanding the cultural disconnects African American youth might experience while learning in school settings that some of them may perceive as having been structured primarily by and for White students.

African American girls are inherently valuable and when we as a society take into consideration the needs and concerns of both Black boys and Black girls we all win. Or as Alexander-Floyd (2014) argues,

Racism and sexism are not only connected; they help to define each other. And the key to freeing black people from both is to transcend the limits of a politics rooted in mainstream myths and attitudes. If African Americans ever want to cash that promissory note for payment of full citizenship that Dr. King famously said was returned for insufficient funds, we have to stop acting as if it was written only to the "other" man of the house. Those engaged in the ongoing quest for freedom and justice have to think about and practice politics, in the words of feminist scholar Wendy Smooth, "as if black women mattered" too (n.p.)

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study was situated within the ethnographic approach of qualitative inquiry. It was also heavily informed by the critical research tradition where issues of power, privilege, and praxis are central. The ethnographic tradition in qualitative research can be described as the systematic, qualitative study of culture, including the cultural bases of linguistic skills and communicative contexts (Creswell, 2013). In terms of praxis, critical researchers acknowledge that all research is an ethical and political act (Carspecken, 1996). Therefore, critical researchers seek not only to name the injustice(s) found in the research site, but also to help establish a framework for the empowerment and social action for and with the participants. This dissertation seeks not only to help advance theoretical knowledge on gender and racial stereotypes and education-related beliefs on the academic and social identity development as it relates to inner-city Black girls, but also to put forth a model of culturally responsive programming that can benefit African American adolescent girls and other historically underserved youth. The purpose of this ethnographic study is to develop an understanding of how gender and racial stereotypes and education-related beliefs shape the academic identity development of urban African American adolescent girls.

This study examines the application of theoretical and methodological frameworks to the study of schooling and identity from an autoethnographic and narrative analysis perspective. In order to guide the analysis process, I employed Black feminist pedagogy and Black feminist thought as the main theoretical foundation. This qualitative study examined how three African American teenage females, made “sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). This research also represents a highly personalized account of my own journey towards development as an urban African American teenager. My own experiences will be closely examined from the inside to better examine, critique, and identify with its intricacies, shortcomings, and rewards. The experiences I have encountered, the problems I face, and the meaning I derive from them will enable educators to reflect upon their own personal and instructional experiences in relation to my own, and thus grow professionally in their own development. Examining the self through an autobiographical lens will continue my own learning, and provide additional insight, data, and reflection regarding the role of an urban educator.

The research question asks *in what way do gender and racial bias contribute to the self-perception of African American adolescent girls?* Interrogating the multiple standpoints that inform African American female identity and how these multiple perspectives are moderated not only by gender, race, and socioeconomic status, but also by ability and classroom context and their role in influencing academic achievement this study is guided by three sub-questions:

1. How do African American girls’ perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their in-school identities?

2. How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their out-of-school identities?
3. What are the tools and strategies Black girls use to resist intersecting oppressions in order to persist in these environments?

This study was borne out of my curiosity about my own identity as a middle-class, professional African American woman who grew up in a poor and working-class environment. However, while I still have working-class sensibilities, I must admit that I am a long way from the little girl who grew up on 126<sup>th</sup> and Kinsman Ave. in inner city Cleveland, OH. Like many professional Black women, I struggle with this duality. Indeed, McClain (1986) wrote about the tension of middle-class African American women having a foot in the Black world, connected and committed to Black people. While also having a foot in the White world as a professional, "I am a member of the black middle class who has had it with being patted on the head by white hands and slapped in the face by black hands for my success" (p. 12). In many ways McClains' struggle mirrors that of African American girls who sometimes feel guilty about their perceived academic success at the expense of their African American male peers (McMillian, Frierson & Campbell, 2010). Yet, there are no serious studies examining the complexity of African American adolescent female subjectivity and equally important how to help resolves issues of identity instability. The aptness for the current study can be found in Austin's (1989) sharply worded and unapologetic call for African American female scholars to strategically use their intellectual pursuits to advocate on behalf of poor and working-class Black women and girls. However, Austin cautions that,

It is imperative that our writing acknowledge and patently reflect that we are not the *voices* of a monolithic racial /sexual community that does not

know class divisions or social and cultural diversity, [furthermore,] “[w]e must not be deterred from maintaining a critical stance from which to assess what black women might do to improve their political and economic positions and to strengthen their ideological defenses. At the same time, however, we must scrupulously avoid the insensitive disparagement of black women that ignores the positive, hopeful, and life-affirming characteristics of their actual struggles, and thereby overlooks the basis for more overt political activity (pg. 554-555).

Taking my cue from Austin (1989), in the process of using ethnographic methods to study the identity of urban African American adolescent girls, I find myself also needing to use autoethnography to interrogate and understand my own journey. The insider/outsider position of the researcher who belongs to the same minority group can sometimes skew the study (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Mullings, 1999). In this regard, it is impossible to engage fully with the autoethnographic research practice without understanding the impact of others on identity construction of self, and a strong theoretical and methodological scholarship can provide a valuable foundation for this process.

I draw on different bodies of research— narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and Black feminist qualitative research—to conduct this study. These different research methods address the complexities of the main components of the research.

### **Rationale for Research Methods**

The use of the qualitative research genre for this study is an appropriate approach because it presents the most comprehensive method to gather and interpret the meaning that African American adolescent girls have constructed for themselves based on their lived experiences. Through qualitative research, African American girls deconstruct their meanings, actions, and perceptions of society to reveal how they construct knowledge. The use of qualitative research is promoted and supported in this project for several

reasons. A review of qualitative research (Creswell, 1998; Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000; McBride & Schostak, 2004) reveals the following. First, qualitative research engages participants. This engagement gives the participants a stake in, as well as an understanding of, the conducted research, which is the basis for action and change. Second, qualitative research may bring about understanding that could lead to change. Third, the thinking of the participants is accentuated, since their articulated views are rooted in their realities. Further, qualitative research is concerned with understanding behavior, not just providing descriptions of behavior. Fourth, the interviews focus on the everyday routine. Finally, participants are afforded fundamental respect as individual human being from the researcher when she or he is employing the qualitative research methods.

I drew on different bodies of research—autoethnography, Black feminist qualitative research and narrative inquiry—to conduct this study. These different research methods addressed the complexities of the main components of the research. First, I captured the participants' descriptions and definitions of classroom or in school incidents as well as reproduce their meaning and intent. Next, I reconstructed participants' meanings and actions, within the context of their usage, and indicated those instances when utterances/non-verbal acts represent speech activity. Then, I analyzed and interpreted those reconstructions to understand the meaning that the participants made from their classroom/in school experiences at the intersection of race and gender.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

The specific method of narrative inquiry that is employed in this project is grounded in the thinking and scholarship of Clandinin and Connelly (2000). The goal of



narrative inquiry is to construct stories, as opposed to discovering solutions. In other words, since there is no absolute, underlying, and true human reality, narrative inquiry is a way of “primarily dealing not with a mode of representing but with a specific mode of constructing and constituting reality...” (Brockmeir & Harre, 1997, p. 60). Narrative inquiry is a qualitative method and research technique/approach that will help to draw out the complex stories of African American adolescent girls. As a research method, narrative inquiry is compatible with the interaction between the researcher and the participant as well as the stories that are told. Learning is not only underlined for the individual; it is understood for the researcher. The researcher is placed within the study to avoid objectification and to conduct research that is transformative (Creswell, 1998). The features of narrative inquiry enable me, as the researcher, to probe into different settings, times, and situations in order to uncover the core issues of the participants’ experiences, regardless of how many times the stories have been told or retold.

Narrative inquiry, as a methodological approach, prevents me from reducing stories told by the participants to an anecdotal collection. Narrative inquiry begins with unstructured interviews, although negotiations between researcher and participants start before the formal interview process begins and continue throughout the research process. “Negotiating entry is commonly seen as an ethical matter framed in terms of principles that establish responsibilities for both researchers and practitioners” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 3). Areas of negotiation include access, boundaries, and accounts.

Negotiation calls for the researcher and each participant to reach agreement on when, where, and how the interviews take place, and whether to include information perceived by the participant as extremely intimate or personally sensitive. Probing in-



depth interviews were conducted to provide the opportunity to explicate a way of making sense of the occurrences in the lives of three African American teenage girl participants, from their own words. “Narratives involve the personal dimension...” (Gibbs, 2002, p. 174) and are a way to capture the key components and the essence of particular personal experiences, thereby, facilitating the analysis and interpretation process. Emerging themes were categorized and findings interpreted to suggest implications. It is only after these stories are deconstructed, reconstructed, and rearticulated that the readers will be able to make some personal sense and construct their own knowledge of the texts and contexts of the experiences, the ultimate goal of narrative of inquiry.

A primary data source for this study is counter-storytelling. Stories were constructed with semi-constructed interviews with the girls and with photo-elicitation interviews (along with document analysis). As a researcher, I participated in the construction of stories, assisting girls in making meaning of lived experiences, and writing actual stories. In this construction process, I positioned myself as an authority equipped with theoretical and cultural sensitivity necessary to interpret the girls’ responses and conceptualize stories. The identity of the person who has the authority to interpret work is an important consideration in narrative inquiry. It is my own experiences—coupled with my knowledge as an educator—that aided me in my endeavor to find the significance in participants’ stories. Thus, I leaned heavily on my cultural intuition in order to construct stories with research participants. Tillman (2002) has emphasized the importance of culturally sensitive research approaches, noting that it allows for collaborative work and mutual understanding between the researcher and the participant, which produces emancipatory experience and work. These stories serve to

counter dominant ideology about the school experiences of Black girls. Additionally, Ladson-Billings (1998) explained that stories are important in critical race studies because “they add necessary contextual contours to the seeming ‘objectivity’ of positivist perspectives” (p. 11).

Girls’ positioned as knowledge holders and experts on their own stories serves to undermine White privilege. Speaking from the position of the minority, stories facilitate an understanding of normalcy outside that of the upper/middle-class White heterosexual male. Counter-stories also serve as tools of resistance and survival for girls, countering the internalization of the dominant narrative through the actual act of telling, collecting, and documenting. Black girls telling their own stories in their own voices in the midst of research that considers them invisible is a form of resistance. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) highlighted three types of counter-stories, including personal stories, other people’s stories, and composite stories. This study collected the girls’ stories of their experiences with intersecting oppressions told in third person.

Each girl participating in the study was asked to share her own educational experience navigating high school in predominantly African American urban educational settings, and to reflect on those experiences as part of her story or testimony. Testimony or *testimonio* privileges the oral narrative of native cultures and uses critical reflection on their personal experiences as a source of knowledge, with particular attention paid to sociopolitical realities (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). In this way, testimony pushes against traditional notions of research objectivity by “situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p, 363).

This mode of delivering information about one's own experience speaks to the Black feminist call for self-definition and autonomy (Combahee River Collective, 1977). In a response to this call for self-definition, and in honor of the cultural tradition of "testifying" or testimony, the girls gave their first-hand accounts of their experiences in school in their own personal stories, which I will present to serve as an introduction to who they are. These accounts and statements are also a testament to the girls' over themselves, their stories, and their education.

### **Testimonies or Personal Stories**

Each participating girl was also asked to create a personal testimony (See Appendix B) describing themselves. The testimonies are an autobiographical work and a practice in self-definition that I felt was critical to this research process. Rather than setting parameters using what I felt adequately described the girls, they were able to demonstrate that they can represent themselves. Through the personal stories, the girls were able to offer a portrait of themselves in a creative fashion. The purpose of the personal stories was to prompt critical self-identification and self-realization.

### **Black Feminist Qualitative Research and Autoethnographic Vignettes**

Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) declare that Black feminist researchers are activist scholars who "see research being for Black women, rather than simply about Black women" (p. 206). Furthermore, Black feminist qualitative researcher Bell-Scott (1994) advocates using nontraditional information sources, such as personal journals, to understand the experiences of Black women. To this end, oral folklore, quilts, music or fashion can be tools that researchers can use to reflect Black female ways of knowing (Few et al, 2003; Richardson, 2003). Indeed, Richardson (2003) moves beyond the

traditional definition of literacies as knowing how to read and write and instead offers a more holistic approach when describing Black female pedagogical sensibilities as, “ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society” (p. 77). Such practices include storytelling, conscious manipulation of speech and silence; code and/or style switching; signifying; and the performance arts (singing, dancing, acting, steppin’, stylin; and quilting and other crafts). Thus, Few et al (2003) posits that,

For Black women, their opinions, values, and resources (e.g. journals, writings, music and other cultural expressive materials) become the frameworks of analysis. Sharing these resources of knowledge within safe, informant-defined space is empowering and useful in providing Black women a space to process their experiences in a systemic manner (p. 207).

Quantitative research on African American females tends to focus or rely on either pathology and/or one-sided notions of what it means to be a Black woman (Collins, 1998; Hooks, 1994). For this reason, Few et al (2003) promote the use of “qualitative methods, particularly interviews or narrative documents” because they “have been instrumental in informing researchers of the various dynamics that shape sexuality, race and gender interactions” (p. 207).

However, African American female qualitative feminist scholars sometimes have impediments when conducting interviews with Black female informants, especially around sensitive topics such as sexuality, physical attractiveness, socio-economic class and language issues. For these reasons, Few et al (2003) suggest researchers follow five practices when interviewing Black women on sensitive topics: (a) contextualizing research, (b) contextualizing self in the research process, (c) monitoring their symbolic

power in the representation process; (d) triangulating multiple sources, and (e) caring in the process. The overarching goal of Black feminist qualitative researcher is to “not only serve as agents of change for their communities, but they also are held accountable for how they represent and validate the knowledge claims of those communities in their research and creative writing” (Few et al, 2003). Griffin (2012) explains it this way,

In this vein, it becomes essential to understand Black feminist autoethnography not only as a means of resistance but also as instrumental to building community. In short, the stories we tell about our lives matter. Stories can inspire self-reflexivity, expose the intricate workings of power, and bring complicity and complacency with domination to light; ... and spark the possibility of identification and trust between and among different identities and interests (p. 14).

Reed-Danahay (1997) acknowledges autoethnography as a valid research method that is marked by its dichotomy. It is a genre of writing with the three characteristics of “native anthropology, ethnic autobiography, and autobiographical ethnography” (p. 2). As autoethnography concentrates predominantly on the researcher’s self and understanding that self within a certain culture, it is the researcher’s personal memory that becomes the primary source of data. However, memories often are forgotten over time or conflated with other events. For this reason, I intend to support data from my memory with data from interviews, personal journals and artifacts.

The autoethnographic vignette was developed by Humpheys (2005) to increase his own self-reflexivity as an ethnographer. Each vignette of my study offers for observation a vivisected event from my professional or personal life. It is hard to separate both as their roots and branches have intertwined into one substance. My decision to use autoethnographic vignettes is two-pronged: to share my life events with my readers and help them reconstruct the missing parts of their own lives. This approach

is in line with Rambo's (2007) claim that through the techniques of autoethnographic vignettes researchers can share their emotions and personal information with readers, who get a chance to construct the meaning of what was not said by a researcher, but only implied.

This study presents vignettes separated in place and time. Initially, I imagined this inquiry as braided cornrows. Cornrows are the result of hair that's braided flat against the scalp. The term itself stems from the nineteenth century. During that time, most Black Americans worked in agriculture to provide for their families. In the United States, we use the term cornrows because they reminded us of cornfields. Cornrows are often formed in simple, straight lines, as the name implies, but they can also be formed in complicated geometric or curvilinear designs. Then I envisioned my vignettes as quilts. Within the African American female tradition of quilt making scholars have identified the following criteria for defining an African American quilt: African designs, techniques, and symbolism as antecedents for the quilting aesthetic. Within the language of quilting, the crazy quilt is a patchwork quilt of a type with patches of randomly varying sizes, shapes, colors, and fabrics. In the African American tradition, the crazy quilt is identified as being "usually embellished with embroidered and appliquéd motifs..." (Hollander, 1993, p. 48).

However, neither of the concepts completely addressed the essence of education autoethnographic vignettes. Albeit it was closer to what I was looking for, I still could not settle for second best, as the concept of crazy quilts perceives the quilt as made of ends and pieces. From my standpoint, educational autoethnographic vignettes are different from all other types of vignettes because students and their lives are not lifeless



odds and pieces but authentic and cognitive entities. In crazy quilts, without ruining its whole image of a quilt, a craftswoman can substitute one colorful piece by another. Unlike a quilt, education endures no replacements but authenticity only. In my further quest, I encountered the concept of Black feminist-womanist storytelling. According to Bell (2017) the principal of Black feminist-womanist storytelling centers on the concept that, “our words and our stories matter and are deemed sources of legitimate knowledge” (as cited in Baker-Bell, 2017 p. 531). Furthermore, this methodology “weaves together autoethnography, the African American female language and literacy tradition, Black feminist/womanist theories, and storytelling to create an approach that provides Black women with a method for *collecting* our stories, *writing* our stories, *analyzing* our stories and *theorizing* our stories at the same time as *healing* from them” (Baker-Bell, 2017, p. 531). In this study using Black feminist/womanist storytelling allowed me to “put my racial, gendered, and sometimes classed experiences in a conversation with one another through storytelling” (Baker-Bell, 2017, p. 531).

While varying by their themes, the vignettes in my study are intrinsically united by the leitmotif of my own personal perceptions of the educational and recreational experiences of what it means to be an urban working-class African American teenager and later a Black middle-class educator. Like the filmmaker’s perception of the events, the researcher’s interpretation illuminates all the ambiguities, subtleties, understatements and dark corners of the problems, implied by the inquiry. This approach makes the whole meaning of the inquiry transparent and comprehensible to its readers. Thus, readers get a chance to make their own inferences and conclusions based on the presented vignettes. Involving the readers to think and infer, adds value to autoethnography as a

method. Not surprisingly, Berry (2006) claims that autoethnography has the power to transform both the researcher and readers alike.

As with life itself, autoethnography vignettes are not one-dimensional either. Some described events are close and understandable; some are distant and not coherent to others. It may take years before an autoethnographer fully understands and interprets them through analysis. The researcher may discover that an underestimated powerful event from long ago has conjured and triggered unexpected new developments in the present. Autoethnography is different from other kinds of research due to a dual role of the researcher as an investigator and as the one being investigated. Baker-Bell (2017) argues that using Black feminist-womanist storytelling can serve as a method of self-healing. Similarly, Carey (2016) posits that writing “can become an instrument for healing... or a means for Black women to enact their agency in resisting or repairing the conditions that wound them” (as cited in Baker-Bell, 2017, p. 532). Autoethnography, “provided me with the space to reconcile past trauma; bring closure to situations; understand how my past, present and future selves are always in conversation with one another” (Baker-Bell, 2017 pg. 532).

As I stated earlier in this study, I reiterate again, that although autoethnography magnifies the researcher’s “self” it is equally essential to protect the “others” from the point of view of ethics because “self is an extension of a cultural community” (Chang, 2008). In fact, researchers do not act in isolation, and do not live in a vacuum. By describing the events researchers witnessed or participated in themselves, does not make them owners of the story just because they told it to the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2010). Researchers’ stories are equally related to other people’s lives and stories as well.



In my case, those people are my colleagues, students, family and friends. Writing autoethnography does not waive my obligation to protect my subjects' confidentiality. The participants in my autoethnographic vignettes were described under assumed names, or pseudonyms. The same goes for the names of schools and other educational institutions.

Researchers have the inalienable responsibility to be genuinely empathetic towards their subjects in their attempt to understand the "others." Ellis (2009) reminds autoethnographers how significant it is to acknowledge connections to other people through supporting relationships ethics. I always kept in mind that it is impossible to trespass on ethical boundaries without ruining the fabric of both the research and the bond it created with the others. In the following autographic vignettes, I reflected on the pleasure and pain of my in-school and out-of-school experiences and my continual healing from those negative experiences and further deepening those positive experiences.

### **Cultural Intuition**

As a part of the narrative inquiry protocol, I attended to cultural intuition as it supports my ability to make meaning of the data. Cultural intuition is a tool for research methodology that challenges dominant Western colonial foundations of knowledge and questions whose experiences and realities are accepted (Bernal, 1998). This approach is particularly important in drawing from a Black feminist framework; the concept of cultural intuition, which was heavily influence by the work of Anzaldua (1987), promotes in inclusion of spirituality in the research, writing, and teaching process in an effort to decolonize each practice. This spirituality, which is evident in cultural intuition, is

essential to Black feminists' ways of knowing; it has been historically integral in the traditions and survival of the Black community. Black feminist specifically maintains a sense of spirituality to guard against the complete loss of cultural traditions, or to maintain and reclaim cultural traditions in the face of Western domination (Phillips, 2006).

Like Strauss and Corbin's (1990) concept of theoretical sensitivity, cultural intuition is the researcher's personal ability to give meaning to the data. Bernal (1998) noted four sources of cultural, including personal experience, existing literature, professional experience, and the analytic research process itself. Additionally, he extends personal experience to include collective experience and community memory, and points to the importance of participants' engagement in an analysis of data. Bernal (1998) has also argued to extend the definition of personal history because it does not happen in a vacuum; there are lateral ties to family and reverse ties to history/the past. In this way, personal history is intertwined with storytelling: it is knowledge passed from generation to generation that can support survival of everyday life and the challenge of people of color by providing an understanding of certain situations and an explanation about why those situations happen under certain conditions.

Existing literature includes both technical literature and non-technical literature. Technical literature includes research studies and theoretical or philosophical writing, while nontechnical writing refers to biographies, public documents, personal documents, and cultural studies writings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Technical literature provides concepts and relationships that are checked against actual data. Descriptive literature provides support for inquiries into the data and helps to generate interview questions.

Both technical and nontechnical literature is used in this work to provide an understanding of the state of the Black girl in education and research.

Professional experience is defined as an involvement in a particular field that provides an insider view on the inner workings of that field (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Benal (1998) has argued that, due to professional experience, a researcher could enter an educational setting and more quickly gain insight on the lives of particular students than those who have never had any experience. In this current study, I have an insight on the educational experiences of Black girls in predominantly urban Black spaces because of my own journey through the educational system. Tilman (2002), who supports the use of cultural intuition and speaking to the importance of culturally sensitive research approach, is worth quoting here:

The discussion here is not intended to suggest that a researcher must be African American to use culturally sensitive research approaches in qualitative research. Rather, it is important to consider whether the researcher has the cultural knowledge to accurately interpret and validate the experiences of African American within the context of the phenomenon under study. Culturally sensitive research approaches for African Americans can facilitate the cultural knowledge of both the researched and the researcher. (p. 4)

Additionally, my cultural intuition strengthens as I engage in an analytical research process, and my insight and understanding increase as I interact with data. Delgado Bernal (1998) similarly maintained that insight is enhanced as the researcher studies the data and includes the analysis of the subjects or participants in it. In this storytelling process, I not only studied the life stories written, but the participants who wrote them as well. Participants were included in the analysis and thus contributed to a dialectic process by which I continue to learn and gain insight.

## **Document Analysis**

Document analysis was used to support the girls' stories and researcher intuition as we reread the documents through a critical raced-gendered lens. These documents also served to establish a clear context for the work in terms of school landscape. I conducted a review of documents, including census (demographic) data, student schedules, school yearbooks, school senior books and school websites to analyze whether patterns indicated by girls' stories reflects were consistent with documents produced directly by the school.

Document analysis support the girls' storytelling and reclaiming of their own lives through a rereading of documents. This allowed the girls to apply their own perspective and give their individual versions of the story behind the document. While I as the researcher or another adult might interpret a grade report or school schedule in one way, a rereading of the document might offer a new meaning in relation to the participant. In terms of establishing context, documents such as the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights (U.S. Department of Education, 2017) data were critical to understanding how race, class, and gender interacted in the school environment and currently affect the girls' lives. School documents like the yearbooks and senior books provided by the participants had a dual purpose. First, they worked to support the girls' stories. In fact, a rereading of the documents with attention to race, class, and gender issues noted by the girls is part of the work of Black feminism as the girls are taking back the narrative and reframing the implications of the documents (Maparyan, 2012). Second, centering the girls' voices and thus their perspectives allow for a new understanding of the documents' representatives of the girls' stories and everyday lived experiences.

## **Interviews**

To enable me to construct their stories, I interviewed the girls four times over the course of three months for one to two hours each time. Three of the interviews were semi structured and one interview was both semi structured and used photo-elicitation (see Appendix C). All interviews were audio recorded. Those recordings were then transcribed verbatim using the narrative inquiry data analysis method. During the semi-structured interviews, I used questions to engage the girls (see Appendix A) in the inquiry. Based on the tenets of both Black feminism and narrative inquiry, the interview questions focused on the girls' experiences navigating intersecting oppressions in their school environment. Question categories for the participants included: 1) racialized school experiences; 2) social life; 3) dating; 4) teacher interaction; and 5) resistance. Each participant was given the opportunity to review and approve transcripts of each interview. Semi-structured, dialogical interviews allow for the telling of stories because they require a less formal dialogue or conversation between the researcher and participant. While there is an interview guide, the researcher can make natural deviations as appropriate, which provides an opportunity to see and understand the topic in new ways (Bernard, 1988).

Upon concluding the study, I met with each girl to discuss their story, and participants had the chance to request changes in their story or to opt out at that time.

## **Photo-Elicitation**

To conduct photo-elicitation interviews, I collected the high school yearbook from one participant. (see Appendix D) I selected photos that I felt could help me further understand the girls' interview responses as well as prompt them to elaborate on or

clarify previous ones. Thus, photo-elicitation interviews served dual purposes: 1) clarify visual description; and 2) to encourage any additional thoughts or explanations from each girl. I chose the following 8 photos: 1) Senior Moments 2) Spirit Week 3) Girls' Volleyball 4) Most Successful 5) Homecoming 6) Boys' Basketball 7) Remember When and 8) What's Next. Like the semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on the participant.

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Using a Black feminist epistemologies as part of the research process allows for a mutual exchange of knowledge and information. Similarly, photo-elicitation was used to jog participants' memories or to enlighten the researcher on new categories or themes. To confirm the information previously presented and to go further in depth with our conversations to the topics that the participants and I discussed in previous interviews, I presented photos related to those topics. Harper (2002) has noted that photo-elicitation is used specifically for identify work because people often represent themselves through pictures. Photo-elicitation can also be particularly helpful in studies about race, and in this case, the photos allowed us to see what we were discussing. Because race is a

construct, there is room for error and confusion when discussing and describing people according to race (Knowles, 2006); however, visual representations can complete and confirm images or other discussed visual elements (Winddance Twine, 2006).

### **Design Decisions**

The purpose of this study was to explore Black high school girls' experiences in a predominately-urban public school in the Midwest. The participants' personal descriptions of situations, reconstructed from interviews may be encircled by the social, political, racial, gendered, and/or social economic locations of the settings and place in time. More importantly, based on the thinking of Black feminist scholars, (Collins, 1998; Few et al., 2003; Hooks, 1994; Richardson, 2003) I placed African American adolescent female participants at the center of this study to understand through texts, discourses, and encounters how these girls' lives are contextualized and framed.

### **Recruitment Procedures**

African American teenage girls are rarely the focus of empirical studies that focus on the racial and gender academic achievement gap. As a result, African American girls' achievements and experiences have been subjugated or blurred within the findings that might have included different genders, other ethnic groups, and the dominant social group. I purposely sought out African American adolescent girls to participate in this study to document the group experience of a historically constructed group. This research study values the knowledge and experiences of Black teenage girls who attempt to make sense of themselves and the world around them as they enter into adulthood.

This study profiled the actions and interactions of three self-identified African American teenage girls aged 18 and 19 years old. These young ladies live in working



class communities throughout the greater Cleveland, Ohio area. All three of the participants have grown up and attended public schools and they all graduated from high school in May 2018. Two of the participants attend the same high school which is located in the inner city of Cleveland, Ohio. The remaining student attends school in a working-class inner-suburb of Cleveland. All three of the participants attend predominately African American schools that are part of majority African American school district. All three of the participants live almost exclusively in African American neighborhoods. In terms of classroom ability, the academic track for the girls ranged from the remedial- to the honor- track. Each participant was given a Letter of Introduction, an Informed Consent Form, and a Demographic Form which fully explains the goals of the research, purpose, methods, techniques, and time frame for completion of the project. The estimated time that might be invested in completing this project, including the anticipated accountability of each participant and me, was also made clear. I provided my telephone number and e-mail address so that the participants could contact me with any questions or concerns. I also personally visited homes to make the return of signed and completed forms easy.

### **Selection of Participants**

Scholarship on the ethical complexities resulting from data collection in qualitative research from existing contacts has been well documented (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This project explores the intersections of race, gender and schooling among urban adolescent girls living in Cleveland and surrounding areas, given substantial evidence that it is a propitious time to do so. The participants all belong to the relevant social



group, so this convenience sample is also purposive as well as being straightforward to generate within the usual limitations of time.

The empirical work for this study took place according to the standard ethical parameters of an open and explicit data gathering process, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity and respondent validation built in. It is important to get different perspectives of urban African American girls that reflect the landscape in which African Americans live. Criteria for selection was that each participant:

- Be a self-identifying African American/Black adolescent female
- Lives in the inner-city and/or inner-suburb of Cleveland, Ohio
- Attended a public school
- Indicates a willingness to openly share and be questioned by me regarding beliefs and incidents or situations related to experiences at school
- Is committed to devoting time necessary for the completion of the data collection process
- Signed the informed consent arrangement and complete the demographic questionnaire.

This study was designed to capture the educational experiences of girls living in urban areas in high school. Using the most recent census data to determine the economic status of the communities for this study, all the girls in this study identified as coming from: 1) working class to 2) middle class backgrounds. Participants were recruited with the help of school librarians. I explained the purpose of my study to the school librarians and two of the librarians suggested three students to me who may fit the study criteria. After speaking with the students and explaining the purpose of the study to them and providing

them with an estimate of how long the study would potentially take, all three of the girls agreed to participate.

Each participant in the study attended only public schools. The size of each participant's family was assorted, with one participant coming from a single-parent household, one from a shared-custody household and one from a two-parent household. None of the participants identified as only children, and the number of siblings ranged from two to five. Each girl identified herself as wanting to continue their education beyond high school; two girls expected to attend either two- or four-year colleges and one girl intended to enroll in cosmetology school upon completion of high school. After the study was approved by the IRB and determined that a participant met the criteria for the study that a girl was asked to participate in the study and presented with the IRB-approved Informed Consent document (see Appendix C). This document specified the time commitment for the study, an outlined the research and interview questions, and the contact information of the researcher and her Chair at Cleveland State University.

Table I

*Participant Demographic Data*

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>LaNisha</b>	<b>Briana</b>	<b>Catrina</b>
Neighborhood	Grovernor	Windmore Hts.	Grovernor
High School	Governor HS	Windmore HS	Governor HS
Grade Level	12th	12th	12th
Age Level	18 yrs. old	18 yrs. old	19 yrs. old
Parent 1 Educ. Level	High School	Graduate Degree	High School
Parent 2 Educ. Level	High School	Graduate Degree	High School
Parent 1 Occupation	Military	Educator	Truck Driver
Parent 2 Occupation	Deceased	Educator	Healthcare Worker
Participant Race	Black	Black	Black
# of Siblings	5	2	3
Extracurricular Activities	Choir (freshman year)	Art Club	Nothing

In concluding the study, I requested one autobiographical project from each participant. The autobiographical projects could be as creative as the participants' imagination. Thus, two students submitted essays and the other student submitted a brief essay which included her own artwork to map out her life story. Finally, I allowed participants to conduct a final review of her own data. The second data source were the transcripts from those interviews. The third and fourth data sources were various personal artifacts (school yearbook and high school art work and poetry) and the vignettes that I produced from the memories that my own artifacts induced. The fifth, six and seventh data sources consisted of field notes, document analysis, and autobiographical essays (See Table 2, below).

Table II

*Data Sources*

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Document Reviews</b>	Documents including census data, student schedules, school yearbooks, photos used in the photo-elicitation interviews were selected by the researcher from documents and Federal Department of Education Civil Rights data were reviewed to give context to the study.
<b>Participant Interview</b>	The actual interview served as an opportunity for the researcher to observe the participants and the setting (Appendix A)
<b>Participant Interview Transcripts</b>	Each girl was interviewed for 90 minutes to 2 hours on four separate occasions over a period of three months. Three interviews were semi-structured, and one was a photo-elicitation. Photos used in the photo-elicitation interviews were selected by the researcher from documents provided by the participants, including school yearbooks. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and member-checked by the participant. When all four interviews were complete, the cumulative transcripts were used to construct stories.
<b>Autoethnographic Vignettes</b>	Each vignette of my study offers for observation a vivisected event from my professional or personal life
<b>Autoethnographic Vignettes Reflections</b>	Here I reflect on the vignettes that I provide and try to make some sense out of them as they relate to my own personal journey through life.
<b>Field Notes</b>	I took notes during interviews and pre- and post-interview interaction with participants over the course of three months. Notes were also taken during document reviews.
<b>Personal Testimonies</b>	The objective of this activity was to produce an autobiographical essay describing the participant (See Appendix B).

## **Data Analysis**

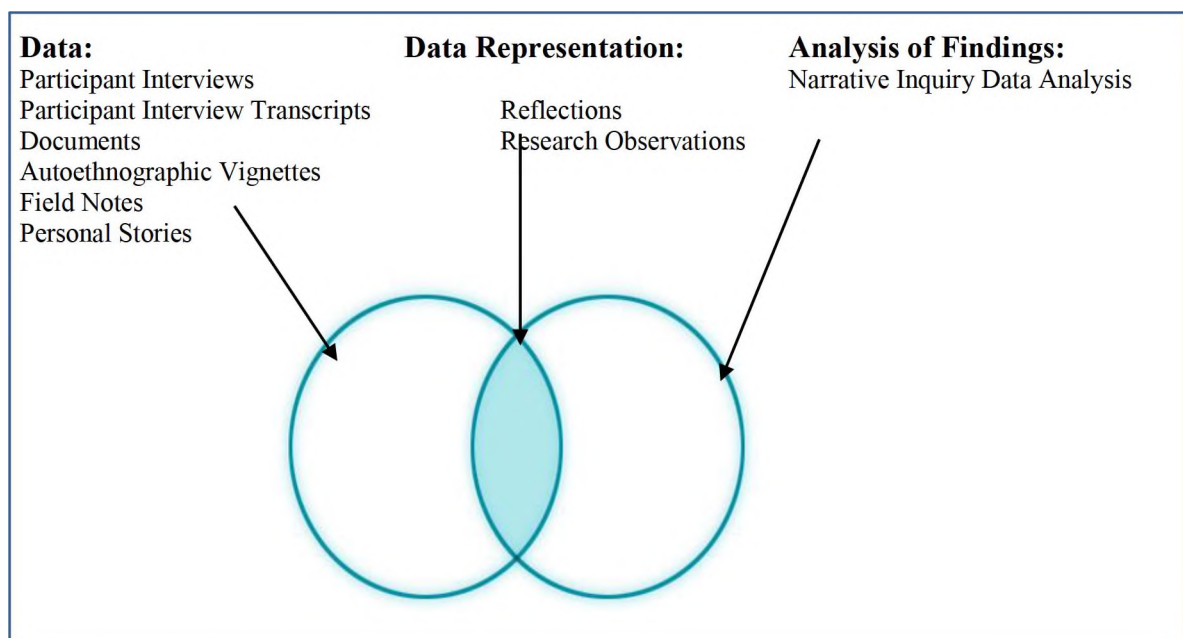
Data analysis for this was ongoing and reflected the iterative nature of qualitative research in which theory building and data collection work in concert (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I moved recursively between the emergent themes found in the data and adjusted my questions accordingly to reflect these patterns. I then subjected the data to a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998).

Qualitative researchers frequently use thematic analysis to analyze themes and patterns that emerge across the data with respect to the film and my individual experiences. Once identified, these themes were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of the participants' collective experience. In conducting a thematic analysis, my first step was to transcribe the entirety of audiotaped data. Using Boyatzis' (1998) description of inductive coding, my second step was to look across the corpus of transcribed data to identify statements that could fall within the overarching codes.

I developed the coding system described below from the collected data, and coded all of the data accordingly. In this analysis, I initially used open coding, reviewing transcripts line-by-line and breaking down data into parts, comparing the similarities and differences in the data (Straus & Corbin, 1990). During the open-coding portion, I used a word-based technique called the key-words-in-context (KWIC) method, which involved reading the text and not words that were used frequently (key words). I then analyzed the context in which the word was used to begin identifying broad themes. Ryan and Bernard (2003) have noted, "in this technique, researchers identify key words and then

systematically search the corpus of the text to find all instances of what word or phrase” (p. 88).

Next, I conducted focused coding: I took themes that emerged in the initial coding phase and used them to synthesize and conceptualize the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As noted by Goulding (1998), conceptualizing is the process of grouping similar items according to some defined properties and giving the items a name that stands for that common link. In conceptualizing, “we reduce large amounts of data to smaller, more manageable pieces of data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 121). In conceptualizing, I reduced the size of data and developed themes that data sources and narrative theory data analysis combine to produce the representations of the data in the form of a story, reflection and researcher observation.



**Figure 1.** Data Representation

## **Ethical Concerns**

Johnson-Bailey (2002) found women of color and poor people are “Othered” in the telling of their stories in some educational research. Johnson-Bailey (2002) reveals an inconsistency between high participation rates and low retention rates in higher education. In noting this inconsistency, the author asserts that Black reentry women are rendered invisible and their needs have gone unacknowledged. In an effort to address this void, Johnson-Bailey (2002) depicts college life through the eyes of older marginalized adult learners, those women existing on the periphery of the ivory tower. She examines the why of their experiences and what triggers adult participation in the formal setting. Moreover, she helps the reader to appreciate and assess the personal changes that marginalized adults’ experience during making meaning out of their educational journey. As an African American woman, it was important that I did not design a study that replicated previous studies that marginalized urban African American female stories. Indeed, my goal is to bring the voice and experiences of urban Black girls to the center in much the same way as Johnson-Bailey has done with reentry African American women in higher education. In doing so, I wish to make the educational and recreational journeys of inner city Black girls visible and thus valid. To do this I will employ strategies to enhance internal validity and reliability. Throughout the study, I remained cognizant of the political and ethical problems that could arise during academic ‘expert’ discourse that may potentially marginalize some voices and bodies (i.e., African American boys and more affluent African American girls) and privilege others, all the while benefitting professionally from the communities they purport to study.



## **Validity Concerns**

Several measures were taken to help enhance the validity of this study, while recognizing that issues of validity are conceived of differently in qualitative and quantitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Like most qualitative research, this study concerned itself with the meanings and experiences of the “whole” person, or localized culture, and it will not attempt to generalize the findings to wider populations—as is often the goal in quantitative research. Instead, this study will seek to generalize findings to potentially generate theory about how racial identity, class and gender operate and function in the literate lives of a group of African American teenage girls.

Furthermore, the claims that are made in this study about how the participants construct their academic and social identity and are motivated to learn will be based on co-constructed dialogue between the researcher and the participants. Moreover, findings or knowledge claims were created as the investigation proceeded. This is in keeping with the basic principles of the interpretive paradigm, which posits that the researchers’ values are inherent in all phases of the research process (Angen, 2000). The interpretive perspective also recognizes that truth is negotiated through dialogue among researchers and participants. That is, findings emerge through dialogue in which conflicting interpretations are negotiated among members of a community.

To that end, I employed some of the standard techniques for enhancing validity in qualitative research, including member checking; triangulating data sources; and checking for rival explanations, or alternative explanations that may refute the researcher’s hypothesis of how meaning is being made in the social context among the participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994).



### **Trust and Privacy Concerns**

Trust was an important component of this research study. Prior to data collection, I contacted each participant to ensure them that this study would not hinder them from enjoying their summer break upon graduation from high school since my data collection would begin after they graduated high school. In addition, I ensured each participant their identities would remain anonymous. Also, each of the participants were given a consent form to sign.

### **Reciprocity**

Creswell (2013) argued that there should be reciprocity between the researcher and the participant. In exchange for their participation, each participant had the opportunity to explore issues of race, class and culture and how these impact their own journey towards self-actualization. This study has the potential to be a starting point in how young urban African American girls begin to make sense of themselves and the world around them. To help with the facilitation participants were given a complementary lunch during their first individual interview with the researcher. In addition, once the study was concluded each participant was given a \$50 Visa pre-paid gift card as an expression of appreciation for her willingness to participate in this study.

### **Social Location of the Researcher**

I am at once an insider and an outsider in this study. I am an insider because as an African American woman who was educated and reared in a predominately working-class Black community in Cleveland, Ohio, I share a sense of fictive kinship with the African American girls in this study. This communal bond is steeped in a shared culture, political outlooks, and the lived experiences that have been forged under the peril of anti-

Black racism, sexism and White supremacists' ideologies. However, in two important ways I am also an outsider to the study. First, I am an authority figure in this study; thus, even though the subjects may feel comfortable talking and sharing their experiences with me, I am aware of the position of power that I hold within this study. Second, because of my professional and educational achievements I am no longer the working-class girl from Cleveland. I have moved into the middle-class, and along with this upward mobility, I have experienced an internal struggle. I have at once a sense of pride of accomplishment and a sense of loss, which is fueled by a longing for my working-class sensibility. Thus, I am paradoxically both a "native daughter" within urban Black communities and a "stranger in the village." And yet, I am both professionally and personally invested in this dissertation project in that I have purposely positioned myself as both a researcher and advocate for urban African American girls by helping to create a space where they can explore issues of race, identity, power, justice and acceptance through historical research, literature and field experiences. I am intellectually indebted to the educational philosophy of bell hooks, who is profoundly influenced by the work of Paulo Freire. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), she argues for progressive, holistic education— engaged pedagogy:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn... Progressive, holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. (pp. 13 and 15).

Hooks remind educators that teaching is intimate and characterized by attention to emotion and feelings. It is in this spirit that I will engage in this current research, and it is

in this spirit that I will work to suppress any biases that I may possess by making my experiences, opinions, thoughts and feelings visible and acknowledge part of the process through keeping reflective journals and using them in writing up the research.

As a researcher, it is important that I acknowledge that although I come from a working-class background however, my new middle-class social status privileges me in ways that sometimes can be insensitive at the very least to those from lower socio-economic levels. In addition, it is equally important for me to be aware of my own stress triggers as a researcher so that I recognize when I need to temporarily take a break from the project to regroup. Finally, to control for bias in the questions that I ask and, in my reporting, I asked my advisors to preview my questionnaire and report before they were submitted.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are the time period in which I capture identity development, my positionality as a researcher, and a limited number of school sites. Because I only focused on Black high school girls from public school districts, this research does not represent a complete view of the girls' identity development process, and strategies and tools of resistance will be limited to the particular stage. Consequently, this study does not reflect elementary or middle schools strategies or sites of resistance. However, while this characteristic of the research might be perceived as limitations, Black girls in elementary and middle school are not my intended scope. In addition, as a researcher with a similar educational experience, my history could have an influence on the interview discussions and the ways girls tell their stories. While I note this as an advantage in terms of cultural intuition, I understand that researchers from

different paradigms may view this as a limitation. Additionally, this study was limited to only two school sites. This feature of the study serves as a limitation because it inhibits the ability to broadly apply the findings of the work. The final limitation of this work is that the sample includes one participant who comes from a middle-class socio-economic background. Her participation could possibly serve to limit the study results, as her parents' educational levels and income could influence both her in-school and out-of-school experiences as well as the strategies used for resistance.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

Using the methodology and data sources described in Chapter Three, I was able to generate insights on Black girls' experiences with intersecting oppressions within a predominantly urban African American environment. This methodology permitted the use of multiple methods and data sources to give context to the work of creating visibility around experiences of Black girls in these public educational spaces. Their stories of resistance and persistence not only stress their voice and experience, but they also suggest ways parents and educators can support this demographic group as well. In this chapter, the findings presented begin with personal stories written by each participant, followed by a brief participant description written by the researcher. After concluding the interview process, I gave each girl participating in the study an autobiography prompts along with examples and ask them to take some time to complete their testimonies or own personal stories. The personal stories are not edited and are delivered exactly as they were given by the girls. Next, I present a summary of each girl's interviews, followed by my own autoethnographic story, and finally my overall analysis of the data.

## **Introduction of Stories**

Following the presentation of the data collected for each girl. I critically analyze each participant's story of her educational experience. Using the codes, I generated, informed by my cultural intuition, my analysis centers on: 1) racialized, gendered and class educational experiences of the girls; and 2) the resistance strategies used to persist in this high school context. This section includes the testimonies of LaNisha, Briana and Catrina as they navigate intersectional oppression in their predominantly African American urban high school.

Starting with Laisha, I begin with each girls' personal story, and then I provide a brief introduction of the girl. Next, I discuss each girl's interview and finally, I provide an analysis of her story. After Briana and Catrina's story, I provide my own story and then I reflect upon my story. Finally, I attempt to answer the three research questions, by providing an overall analysis of each of our collective journeys through predominantly African American urban high schools.

Dialogic interview conversations with participants were guided using the questions in Appendix A. Discussions were not limited to these questions; however, they assisted in prompting the girls to detail their experiences. During our four interviews I conducted with the participants, over a two-month period, they were asked to give examples and further details of their events or experiences they described. This included discussing photos (see Appendix C). Interview questions for the girls generally focused on: 1) racialized school experiences; 2) social life; 3) dating; 4) teacher interaction and 5) resistance.

## **LaNisha's Story**

My name is LaNisha Moore. I go to Governor high school. I am also in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I only play two sports for right now. I play tennis and I am on the drill team. I only have 3 favorite colors' they are purple, pink and blue. I like reading on my free time. The person I look up to is my father and siblings because I feel like they set good examples for me.

My mom die when I was 2 years old. I have 4 brothers but only 3 are living. My dad take care of us. When I was a child I remember going to daycare with my sisters and brothers. We use to go on field trips at my old daycare. During my childhood I use to always stay with one of my older sister. I miss going places with my sisters. I remember always going to my auntie house she my only Auntie I really know on my mom side.

I went to M.R.W school. For 4 years because I got kick out of the school. But before I got kick out the teacher that really helps me was ms. Ford. That school really didn't help me with my education. The teachers wouldn't help me so I feel like that why I was behind in my classes. I was happy to leave school. After I left M.R.W school I went to F.D.R. I feel like F.D.R really help me with my education. F.D.R was a really good school for me because I had teachers that really care for me.

This school year I will get good grades. 5 years I will be 24 years old I see myself having my own nail salon business. I will have different types of business that I want to own. 10 yeas I see myself having a family and a career.

I want all my teachers to really help me like don't just give me the work help me understand it. Make this school year the best. I'm not getting in trouble at all this school year (LaNisha).

**Introducing LaNisha.** LaNisha is a medium complexion African American girl with medium length hair that she keeps in braids or straighten. LaNisha also wears false eyelashes and flesh-toned lip-gloss; she sometimes wears eyeliner and eye shadow. LaNisha took remedial English Language Arts and Mathematics classes in her freshman through junior year in high school. This year, LaNisha was able to take a college-level math course at her local community college. As a participant, LaNisha was very professional and polite. During our initial interview, LaNisha was very eager to help me.



In her words, she wanted me to “do real good with [my] paper.” I appreciated her enthusiasm in wanting me to succeed; however, I needed her to feel relaxed enough with me so that I could get her own truth and not one manufactured for my benefit. To make her feel more at ease, I let her know that we would be speaking as casually as we would when we are not in a school setting. By this, I explained to her, that I would be conducting the interview in Black English and that for our meetings there were no right or wrong way for us to communicate with each other.

By the second interview, LaNisha was very candid about incidents at her school and her feelings on race, class and gender relations. It was during this second interview where I introduce LaNisha to the photos from the high school yearbook in order to engage her memory. As with myself and all the other participants, the first photo that we discussed was the “Remember when...” section of the yearbook. In this section of the yearbook, graduating seniors are asked to recall their most significant memories of high school life. LaNisha’s voice was powerful, and she was very direct, seeming purposeful about being heard and taken seriously.

**LaNisha’s Interview.** LaNisha describes her school experience as being disorganized and not very engaging. While there are some extracurricular activities at her school, she wishes that they were more career focused. She intends to enroll in community college and cosmetology school simultaneously upon graduation. Previously, she attended a career-focused school. One of the careers at that school was nursing. However, once she enrolled in the school she learned that the students, primarily African American girls like herself, were being trained to be nursing assistants. She considered this both racist and sexist in that the students were not being cultivated to become nurses

but rather aides. She saw this as demeaning and she further tied it to the district's overall failure in that the expectation for Black students were not rigorous. When I mentioned to her that for the past few years her school district had rolled out specialty schools designed so that all students could have a choice on various college and career programs that were open to all students. This did not convince her at all. For starters, she pointed out that a lot of other girls like styling hair and that the school did not offer a cosmetology school as it had some years back. However, what she found most disappointing was that all the college focused schools required students to test and/or interview to get accepted. In her words, she didn't see herself or students like her ever getting into those types of schools:

Umm, you gotta be hella smart and hella perfect ta get into them type of schools. I'm in special ed but I'm still smart and I bet if they gave me a chance I could get into one of them early college schools. But I don't really like interview real good. I get nervous and start acting all shy and stuff. And takin a test? Please...I'm definitely not good at that. But it gotta be a way to tell if somebody smart other than that. Still I don't care 'cause I'm going to hair school any way. Only thing is I want to get my manager license 'cause I want to own my own shop and if I got into one of them schools I coulda learned about management.

She recalled several incidents with teachers and herself and other African American students, particularly Black girls, in which she feels the teacher, regardless of race and gender, underestimated the students' potential for growth and/or advanced learning. These incidents included racially insensitive comments, inequitable treatment of Black girls whom the teachers deem too "ghetto," and student invisibility. LaNisha stated:

So you know I like to do hair and stuff. I always, I mean ALWAYS, do my hair in different styles. So like this one day I come to school and everyone was like 'oh you lookin' good Nisha! Why this... the teacher go say 'That's a weave... I know you wearing a weave. I know sistas love them some weaves! Y'all can't live without those weaves.' He just started cracking up after he said that. You know I was lightweight embarrassed,

but I kept cool and just sat down and didn't say nothing to him. He act like only Black girls wear weaves. He so stupid. See, its stuff like that just be gettin to me.

In general, she described a school environment that was generally dismissive and punitive towards African American girls. According to her, Black girls where either quiet or loud. If you were quiet and shy that meant you were smart and had a future. However, for girls like LaNisha, who were loud in speech, laughter, anger, hair and clothes then they were judged to be low performing and underachieving or in other words "ghetto." This is true she says even when compared to Black boys that were seen as "ghetto." The difference with the boys is the tone that the teachers and administrators took with the boys as opposed to the girls. She recalls one occasion when her teacher, Mr. Johnson, continuously called her out in class when other students in her class were exhibiting the same behavior. LaNisha said:

Like they will watch the Black girls harder. If they do something, it's a case where you get sent to the office stat [immediately]. Oh but let it be a boy. I don't care if he play football or he a fighter. If he do something he get all kinda chances to do right. Like with Lamar and Ray. We all in class laughing about something on Ray's Instagram. Why Mr. Johnson single me out of the group and tell me to put my phone away or go to the office. First, it wasn't even my phone!

In one culminating incident the teacher tried to get her removed from his class and placed in another class with another teacher. When that didn't work he moved LaNisha's seat in class, alluding to her excessive conversation with a classmate. However, LaNisha felt this episode was just another example of inequitable treatment she had received from this teacher, because the African American male classmate that she was punished for talking to was not also moved or subject to any consequences. While LaNisha usually tried to avoid interaction with teachers, to circumvent what she referred to as

embarrassing situations, she felt this incident was her breaking point. She decided to ask for a private conversation with the teacher. In order to deal with the incident appropriately, she spoke with an older sibling and her father about how she should request the meeting and represent her feelings about the situation. She decided to email the teacher to request a conference. At that time she explained she felt he was not treating her fairly in class and that it was affecting her ability to learn and respect him. LaNisha explained that the teacher apologized for the treatment noting that he had not noticed it as inequitable, and never called her out in class again.

LaNisha revealed that incidents that she described as both racist and sexist, or what Bailey and Trudy (2018) defines as misogynoir, where both racial and gender profiling combine to suppress Black women and girls, happen often in school. These incidents have caused her to distance herself from the White teaching staff. However, she experienced or observed misogynoir with the African American teaching staff as well and in addition to some distancing she also felt their action caused her some pain and confusion. For example, LaNisha described what she felt were rude comments from a Black female teacher towards Black female students mainly related to dress code. LaNisha explained that although the dress code policy had changed, and some rules or restrictions were eliminated, many African American female teachers still commented on girls' dress, making statements like: "That's not a good look" or "That's not cute," which she felt was inappropriate or embarrassing for students like her. Also, she felt this was out of line because the dress code was eased, and she felt that the students were in compliance but added their own flare to what would otherwise be a very plain and boring

outfit. Essentially, LaNisha felt these comments toward Black female students on the basis of their body or looks in general were a form of harassment. She noted:

Like we don't have no White girls [at her school] but I bet they wouldn't do that to them. The boys' pants be literally falling off they butts, underwear showing and all! But all the teachers would say to them is "pull them up." But with the girls' its everything that we do from our hair [the colors too loud or the weave too long] or anything like that and how we dress. Its pants too tight, dress too short, shirt too tight or too low cut. It's like, dag can I just live?

LaNisha, who has a full-figured body, felt she was more likely to be noticed by teachers than thinner girls. Similarly, LaNisha felt clandestinely colorism tension from peers or classmates in her school, which has influenced her to choose to socialize with only a small group peers, whom she describes as her "real friends." She noted that this is a small group of friends with similar interests and similar school experiences. LaNisha went on to explain that these students have similar reactions to biased comments and actions from students in her school. In one example of peer colorism, LaNisha describes a social media post by a light complexioned African American boy in her school. The light complexioned student noted his disapproval of the Black emoji created by the Apple Company; he commented that he did not feel that "Black people needed the [darkest complexion emoji] since people would not be able to see it because it was so dark [implying that the features were indistinguishable]." While LaNisha explained that there haven't been many instances of colorism this bold or overt from students, she acknowledged that it wasn't that far from the general culture of the school that she experienced. LaNisha noted that most other instances of colorism demonstrated by her peers were disguised as a joke. Sometimes lighter skin-toned Black students made consistent comments about darker complexioned Black students' skin color. For

example, one brown skin toned female student referred to another student as “midnight” because of his dark complexion.

As a result, LaNisha generally avoided communicating with students outside of her close group of friends, as she did not feel or want to pretend these types of jokes were okay. LaNisha also noted that Black girls have a particular experience among peers because of prevalent ideas of beauty. According to LaNisha, the dominant view of beauty in the school was a light complexioned and long loosely curled hair with a curvy figure and ample buttocks. This eliminated the possibility of a lot of Black girls being seen as beautiful, and further participating in school activities associated with beauty or popularity that comes with beauty such as pageants, homecoming, and prom competitions. However, she explained that Black boys, mainly because of sports popularity and their perceived “coolness,” can access and date any girl they want, White and Latina girls included. When asked about potentially dating White boys, LaNisha laughed a little and replied, “Umm, no. We just not attracted to each other. So that’s a big no.” I followed up and asked her what about the possibility of dating Latino boys. LaNisha, humped her shoulders and said she never really thought about it but felt Latino boys were, “kinda like white boys who speak Spanish and love trying to act Black so they can say the n-word.” This creates a very limited dating pool for Black girls inside and outside of the school. In the excerpt of our conversation below, my cultural intuition helped me to probe deeper as LaNisha mentions views of beauty that do not necessarily include herself or other Black girls. My own experience with colorism and dating preferences among Black men pushed me to inquire further about how dating is affected by these standards of beauty and popularity. Figure 2 illustrates a conversation in which



LaNisha explained the type of behavior required to be a part of the popular group at her school.

<b>LaNisha</b>	<b>“Umm, you know it’s only a certain type of girl that could be on homecoming court or prom queen and stuff like that”</b>
<b>Researcher</b>	“What allows them to be on homecoming court and/or prom queen?”
<b>LaNisha</b>	“They try to act like they better than the rest of the girls. Or they are like mixed or have long hair or have a nice shape”
<b>Researcher</b>	“When you say they act like they’re better, you feel they are acting fake”?
<b>LaNisha</b>	“Yeah, a little”
<b>Researcher</b>	“And you aren’t willing to do that?”
<b>LaNisha</b>	“Naw; [laughter] NOPE!”
<b>Researcher</b>	“Why not?”
<b>LaNisha</b>	“I’m too real for that. I love and like myself for who I am and I don’t have to fake who I am to be friends with nobody when I can be myself around who I like to hang with.”

**Figure 2.** Interview Excerpt: LaNisha Interview 3

Ultimately, however, LaNisha is adamant that while the inequitable treatment from teachers and students affected how she operated in the school, she said her academics were not affected. She noted that if she wanted to make good grades, she would make good grades, which she did. LaNisha earned A’s and B’s in her English and History classes. However, LaNisha did believe that a more diverse faculty would allow her to develop better relationships with teachers possibly leading to a better learning experience.

**Analysis of LaNisha’s story.** LaNisha’s story illuminates the nature of the terrain she navigated at her predominantly African American urban public high school and the effects on her educational experiences as a working-class Black girl with a majority middle class faculty. LaNisha, as well as Mr. Johnson, describe an extremely isolating educational experience for African American female students whose comportment and



panache is deemed outside of traditional notions of lady-like behavior. LaNisha's high school experience was one marred by marginalization based on race, class and gender. Her story revealed that exclusion, not just on the part of students but mainly teachers and administrators significantly affected the way she operated in school. While she described misogynoir and class difficulties within the student body, she noted that the school and classroom climate is mainly affected by the behavior of her teachers and administrators.

She indicated that being a Black girl at school was difficult because of the bias from other students, specific difficulties dealing with hair and dress for girls while exclusion based on her classroom behavior are largely affected by teachers. LaNisha described a hostile classroom environment characterized by teacher harassment or bullying, public ridicule and cultural insensitivity. Further, outside of the classroom she has described administrative public stereotyping of Black and lower-income communities. This atmosphere caused LaNisha to be more of an introverted student. However, she does participate in extracurricular activities or sports but limits her participation and classroom interactions with both teachers and students.

Still, LaNisha remained a high achieving student who took math courses at the local community college, as she viewed academics as a viable option for future progress. While she did indicate that her overall school participation and class participation would increase if she was more comfortable in school, her persistence is illustrated in efforts to carve out a space for herself in the school and willingness to confront teachers for unfair treatment as well as report them to her father. In my interactions with LaNisha, my cultural intuition led me to ask what turned out to be very important questions about her course choice. From my own experience being an outspoken and academically talented

African American girl, I know the isolation that can happen in that setting, thus, I know a strategy is needed to be able to survive and thrive in that environment. LaNisha being a high achiever despite being tracked as remedial throughout her academic career, led me to believe there had to be a reason she was able to have those outcomes. The interview process revealed that LaNisha utilized several supports to navigate the high school terrain. Specifically, in her regular and remedial high school courses and college math class she saw her achievement as something that she had to be successful at to prove to herself that she was capable of success in her future. In short, she saw no other option than achieving in school, because her future aspirations and her father and late mother. She described her friends as a support system on which she depended for all her socialization needs. LaNisha also indicated that they are a group of Black girls and boys who are like-minded and have similar experiences at the school, thus she could take to them about school incidents and relate to their perspectives. LaNisha also used her own strength to both identify and address instances of racial, gender or class aggression towards her, as illustrated in the incident where she arranged a meeting with her teacher. Lastly, LaNisha depended on the advice and support of her family, namely her father to help her navigate and confront situations with teachers and other students, specifically when issues concern academics and relationships.

Resistance and persistence are evidenced in how LaNisha continued to participate in college level classes despite additional discomfort because of social isolation. Also, despite being tracked as remedial throughout her academic career, LaNisha saw herself as a high achiever and college bound student; and was adamant about determining ideas or definitions of beauty for herself.

LaNisha's story can provide educators and researchers with an understanding of the educational experience of poor and working-class African American girls in a predominately-Black high school with a majority middle class faculty and staff. Her story conveys the need for school officials and parents to address the lack of attention given to including these students in the school and the lack of cultural sensitivity among teachers and administrators. On a system level, this story calls attention to the negative aspects of the neighborhood-schooling concept and highlights issues with school choice for Black parents in the district. Her story also indicated a specific need for extracurricular opportunities specifically geared towards the Black student body. LaNisha's academic performance may attribute too many of these factors going undetected, as she is performing well.

### **Briana's Story**

Who is Briana Riseman? I am a creative, fashionable, caring, family oriented, socially awkward, sarcastic black girl. The best way to express myself through some form of creativity or art. Throughout my years of school I've always been a loner and recently became more comfortable coming out of my "no talking zone". Being different or having an old soul was hard for me in high school often I felt as though I am too mature and should be in the generation on of people older than me. I live with my mother and brother in Windmore Heights. My friends range from 12 to 15 and close friends, I have three. I have a boyfriend of 3 years from sophomore year of high school to now. This is a painting that I did called Silent Scream. Sometimes I want to scream but I remember that I always have to keep it together and represent myself with class (Briana). (See Appendix E for Brianna's artwork that accompanied this essay)

**Introducing Briana.** Briana was by far the most stylish of the group. Briana, a dark-skinned daughter of K-12 educators who both attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), usually wore her hair in cornrow braids or straight with some

weave pieces added for fullness. Briana has a model look, standing about 5 feet 8 inches tall and being slender. She was more mature, self-aware and self-assured than the other two girls. Briana clearly stated various instances of inequality that she experienced in school and seemed to have the most experience discussing these issues outside of the interviews I conducted. She was the most opinionated of the participants and had a clear picture of how she felt the school, and even the world, should be changed and improved.

**Briana's interview.** Briana had a significant amount of assistance acclimating to high school because of the incredible support and guidance from her parents, her maternal grandfather, her maternal aunt and uncle, and other family support. Briana insisted her mother and grandfather helped mold and prepare her for what she faced in high school based on their own knowledge as both a high school librarian (her mom) and as a retired high school guidance counselor (her maternal grandfather). Briana said:

I guess I just learned a lot from my mom and granddad about what to expect in high school and what classes and activities I needed to take to get scholarships to college. My mother was big on telling me about extracurricular activities that I can get into. My dad encouraged me to get into some type of sports. My family just really helped build that confidence in me because if you don't have confidence in being yourself then you already fail before you start. That's just the facts.

Briana especially appreciated her mother and grandfather telling her about somewhat turbulent issues that students had with teachers and administrators. Because of these stories, and her own morals and interests, Briana, resigned herself to associating only with a close group of friends she has for the most part maintained since middle school. She explained that she and her friends are relegated to the outskirts or margins of the school community for a variety of reasons regarding their "fit" into the larger student body. In the dialogic conversation with Briana in Figure 3, I asked Briana

probing questions to understand what differences she saw between her friends and the larger student body.

<b>Briana</b>	"I guess we are different we kind of stand out how we dress and stuff and I guess like how we are different and other groups look at us differently."
<b>Researcher</b>	"Different how?"
<b>Briana</b>	"Umm, let me think. Like how they think about you? Like we dress sort of top shelf [ <i>starts laughing</i> ]. No but for real we just different like that. Not that we think we better we just different. Like into old soul music and art."
<b>Researcher</b>	"What do you think they think about you?"
<b>Briana</b>	"I guess they think we are like well-dressed stylish hippies and stuff."

**Figure 3.** Interview Excerpt: Briana Interview 3

Briana noted that she and her friends did not fit the description of "preps" that is traditionally applied to White students that are part of a peer group like hers, because she and her friends did not live in the required neighborhoods. She also expounded about the separate interests of her group versus White "prep" identified students in that she and her peers share similar interests as it pertains to race and are reluctant to participate in illicit activities that are popular in upper income "prep" school circles including drinking and smoking.

<b>Briana</b>	"I think we are just different from other kids like we don't do stuff they usually do and...I think we just talk to each other like that's all we do. Talk."
<b>Researcher</b>	"When you say you don't do stuff they usually do, what do you mean? What are you not into?"
<b>Briana</b>	"They like, like drinking and stuff and like smoking and that's just disgusting."

**Figure 4.** Interview Excerpt: Briana Interview 1

While Briana is outgoing and talkative in her small group, she describes herself as a very quiet person in class that participates for grading purposes, but not much beyond that because her lack of interest in course material and lack of associations with classmates. Going in detail on her feelings about curriculum, Briana explained that she did not feel her courses related to or taught her enough about her life issues. She also shared that her classes did not teach much about African American history and culture, most of which she and her peers had to learn about outside of school. In describing her favorite teacher and favorite classroom experiences thus far, she explained that her English teacher, Mr. Davis, taught in a fun, interactive, and critical way. Briana said that Mr. Davis incorporated more political issues that dealt with diversity and activism, and had students work in assigned groups that eliminated the awkward student partnership that usually happens in class. Briana said, “He always brought up like diversity and stuff, and taught us like what’s wrong and what’s right.”

The student partnering is described as awkward because of the difficulty of being chosen by peers that do not normally associate with her. Often partnering proves to be a further marginalizing experience. In discussing the difference in her behavior in school versus outside of the school with friends and family, Briana explained that she believes there is a certain way she should act in school under the eyes of teachers and her peers that is more acceptable, but that is not necessary around friends and family where she can be free. This adjusted behavior included the way she socialized and what she said in conversation. Briana stated, “I think I’m different because there is a way you are supposed to act in school that’s like acceptable and then a way you act outside because it’s just you and your friends like no one else is watching you.”



Although Briana was a member of the art club, for which she earned an internship at the Cleveland Art Museum, she did not look forward to participating in any other school activities throughout her time in high school because of her disinterest in socializing with students outside of her group. When I introduced the yearbook photos to Briana, she mentioned that except for prom, most other high school activities did not interest her. I committed that I thought she would be a perfect fit for the Girls' Volleyball team. She quickly disputed that notion and explained that she more so looks forward to college and the diverse experience and choice of curriculum it has to offer. However, she is clear that unlike most of her family, she does not want to attend a HBCU because she does not feel that it will give her a racially diverse experience. What's more, like high school, she is somewhat hesitant of HBCUs because she thinks they will reflect her high school experience where popularity is required to be an integral part of the schools and participate in certain activities. Briana does not believe in the basis for which popularity is awarded. She further clarified the basis of popularity, which included one's looks based on proximity to Whiteness celebrating long blonde hair and White skin. Briana was unaffected by these parameters for popularity and beauty. She concerned herself more with her own definitions of beauty and those of her group of close friends. In Figure 5 below, I engage in an exchange with Briana to further understand her thoughts on friendship and support.

<b>Briana</b>	"I think it's just knowing that no matter what you will always have friends; you won't be like alone like it's just not possible like everyone has a friend."
<b>Researcher</b>	"So you use your friends as a support system, you don't worry about making others like you outside of that?"
<b>Briana</b>	"Yeah."

**Figure 5.** Interview Excerpt: Briana Interview 3



Her own definition of beauty included more than outward appearance as she noted that a girl can appear very pretty but the way someone acts and presents herself is equally as important to general beauty as appearance. Her close group of friends helped her maintain these beliefs as they have similar insights. Her friends' support also helps her avoid a preoccupation with popularity or attempts to integrate herself into the fabric of the school.

**Analysis of Briana's story.** Briana's story details the issues with fitting into the majority class structure at the school as well as cultural issues imbedded in the curriculum and class structure. Though Briana is from a middle-class household, she indicated that her neighborhood eliminated her from what would typically be labeled as prep culture as those students typically identified as prep live in neighborhoods that are more expensive. However, most of the students at her school segregated themselves according to cliques. Moreover, even at a nearly all African American school these cliques sometimes marginalized Black girls who did not meet certain physical standards from their groups. In class, Briana experienced not only a distancing from other students, but the class subject matter and structure as well. Her isolation from the class subject matter was due to what she considered a lack of African American history and culture in the curriculum. Similarly, she disliked when teachers would group random students in her class to do projects preferring the interactive nature of Mr. Davis, who was more inclusive and interactive in his classroom. For Briana, a teacher who not only offered more engaging and critical subject matter, but a more community focused classroom structure ensured a better classroom experience.

Briana rejected not only the behaviors of her majority peers but their conceptions of popularity and friendship as well, creating her own standards more so focused on morality and character than the given standards of beauty and class. Also, her small group of Black friends served as a support system that allowed her to ignore the marginalization in her school concentrating instead on quality of friends versus quantity. Similarly, while the lack of diversity in course offerings as well as class structure is not conducive to a good classroom experience for Briana, she maintained a view of herself as a college bound student who has no option but to achieve in school. Her main technique for resistance is code switching, which Suddler (2014) defines as the way "...Black Americans 'switch' their interactional style to better accommodate new or different environments or persons in positions of authority" (p. 385). Briana noted that though she felt her, and her friends' behaviors and choices were acceptable, in school and more specifically class, she understands that a certain behavior is expected from teachers. Thus, she minimizes her contact with teachers and the school discipline system, while simultaneously maintaining her appreciation for her culture.

My cultural intuition was key in dialoging with Briana. Often, she was hesitant to talk about racism and avoided using the terms Black and White in our initial interview. However, when she explained that she and her friends were "different," or she was not engaged in class, my probing questions illuminated that it was that she and her friends were very proudly African American, and the course material was not inclusive of Black history and people.

Resistance and persistence are evidenced in how Briana viewed herself as a college-bound student. Rejected behaviors and standards for majority students in favor

of personal standards. Briana also recognized standards of beauty set by majority students and employed code switching to maintain cultural ties and group friends while avoiding any issues with teachers or administrators.

Briana's story highlighted the need for the school administration to consider diversifying the curriculum offered to include the needs of all students in the school. Additionally, her story indicated a need for school officials to address the need for culturally relevant and appropriate pedagogy in designing classroom structure and course subject matter.

### **Catrina's Story**

I am Katrina Saunders and I was born in Cleveland, OH in 1998. I am 19 years old. I am African American. I am the only girl out of my mother two children also I am the oldest. My father is not in my life. I live with my three brothers, my great-grand father and my mother. I have took a speech class at Tri-C [Cuyahoga Community College] while still being in high school. I have a certificate for peer mediator. I have work at Rally's and a bowling alley. I am going to college to be a broadcast journalist. I always wanting to be a Journalist since I was 14 years old. My answer never change. One day I would like to have a tv show called Speak Your Mind. I pick that name because my talk show would be about people coming out about how they feel deep inside. I feel like some people need to be heard. People need to hear the truth on some things. I also want to write a book. The book would be called It All In Your Soul and Mind. I want to give back to my community (Katrina).

**Introducing Katrina.** Katrina is a light-skinned girl with natural hair that she keeps in an afro-puff ponytail. She is 5 feet and 5 inches tall and about average build. Katrina was the most nervous in interviews, displaying more reticence to discuss issues than the other participants. Initially, I wasn't sure why she was skittish, but I found it interesting that unlike the other girls Katrina was most intent on letting me know that her in school behavior reflected who she was as a person.

**Catrina's interview.** Catrina relies heavily on a very tight knit group of friends whom she describes as different from the other students at her school; mainly based on the music that they like and the way they dress. During our interview when I showed Catrina the yearbook photos, the "Elocution Faceoff," where students voted on categories like who is the most likely to succeed, who is the most popular, and who is the most talkative, Catrina seemed particularly aggravated. Catrina explained that most of the students at her school hung together in cliques and she was fine with this arrangement since she too associated exclusively with a group of students that held similar interest as her. Catrina explained, "My school is like split into groups, people just like to hang out with their kind of people, like it's really weird and some people don't like to talk to other people, but it's like that mainly with athletes and that's it.)

Thus, though the athletic students dominate the social structure of their school, Catrina knew she had to feel comfortable not participating in that structure and instead hanging out exclusively with her friends. Because of the consistent presence of her friends, she rarely felt isolated though she has had some instances of isolation or marginalization that her friends could not help her avoid. Catrina explained:

If a football player runs for something, then they are not gonna vote for anybody else ... I don't think anyone from my crew would want to do stuff like that because they already know no one is gonna vote for them so why bother.

Though Catrina is enrolled in a mix of regular and remedial courses where there is a high percentage of football players and popular students, she describes one elective class experience in which she ended up in a class with all high performing students. She explained that she was placed in an elective Spanish class full of academically gifted students (or "the real smart kids") and although they in many ways dominate the school,

she had never been in that situation previously. In this instance she decided, considering the student population and their socialization patterns, that it would be best to avoid all interaction with these students. Catrina knew her classmates felt differently about her than they did about each other and although she didn't mind talking to them, she did not want to risk the impending rejection. She felt so uncomfortable without the support or presence of her like-minded peers that she maintained her silence through the semester. Although she was able to handle herself, she tries to avoid having another experience where she feels that she is the outcast. Last year her older cousin graduated from the same high school, Catrina used her cousin's advice on teachers and classes to avoid these situations. Catrina said, "Yeah, like one time when I had an elective and there were like none of my friends in there and no one I could talk to, so I didn't really talk to anyone in that class that whole semester."

Catrina had a similar experience of isolation and what she calls bullying during an interaction with a 10<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Catrina has had very few good relationships with teachers. However, one teacher she remembered was particularly unfair, in that the teacher consistently called Catrina out in class. Catrina explained that she felt the teacher regularly called on her because she was a struggling student creating embarrassing situations in front of other classmates. She noted that the same teacher cited her countless times for dress code violations, even after the rules were dismissed, resulting in her missing class on numerous occasions. According to Catrina, "I just felt like she gave me a hard time like every class, like she was just always picking on me and calling on me. It just seemed like she was always coming after me."

Catrina felt like she was unfairly targeted in class and for dress code violations as she could not remember any other students being called on as much as her and felt that the girls with similar styles or outfits were not cited by the same teacher for dress code violations. Katrina was not sure of the reason she was targeted in either case she could only guess that it was because she was struggling in that class and maybe the teacher didn't think she looked right in her clothes. The excerpt from our conversation in Figure 6 below illustrates her feelings on her progression and how she now handled unfair administration practices.

<b>Catrina</b>	"I just try to stay away because I don't want to like constantly be in the office for like dress code or just be seen and be a target, so I just try to go to class, a wear appropriate things to school."
<b>Researcher</b>	"So you know it's unfair but you're not trying to continue to be punished for it over and over again?"
<b>Catrina</b>	"Yeah."

**Figure 6.** Interview Excerpt: Katrina Interview 4

Consequently, she resolved to be better in school, feeling that if the teacher would not continue to pick on her if she were a more confident and knowledgeable student. She noted that this did help as she felt toward the end of the semester the teacher called on her less. In addition, with the elimination of most of the dress code policy, though the teacher made comments about her dress, she was no longer dismissed from class because of it.

For Katrina, comfort is the driving force behind her decisions in school in terms of classes, teachers and social spaces. Her own experiences in remedial versus more advanced classes as well as her friends, her cousin's high school experience and advice



on classes and teachers, and her interactions with her peers influence her high school decisions. Though she sees intelligence measurements and gender as factors that influence every part of her school experience, she was confident that her ability to learn or her intelligence level and further character are not dependent on IQ measurement. Catrina explained, “My intelligence not really based on nothing they [her peers and teachers, alike] can determine and ain’t got nothing to do with me being Black or a female. It’s based on how I act in school and what I learn.”

**Analysis of Catrina’s story.** Unlike the other participants in the study, Catrina emphasized issues related to classroom ability above all else. A reasonable explanation for this focus is the fact that Catrina is the only girl participating in the study that had been tracked since middle school for remedial education. Her schooling was affected by this scholastic awareness, because the students in the school are both aware of and concerned about it, and they segment themselves by their academic aptitude. Catrina’s story indicated that classroom ability is inextricably tied to comportment and deportment in the fabric of the school on the part of the student body and faculty. Catrina highlighted measures of exclusion based on learning capability but explained that academic exclusions were also determined by social parameters. Thus, her school experience was limited, with reduced participation in extracurricular activities, sports, and as well as the classroom. Most students created cliques and exclude students like Catrina based on group status and educational attainment criteria. Her story, or interactions with those students are largely negative and punitive. As a female student, her negative and inequitable interactions were for the most part directly related to dress or appearance.



To combat the exclusion and negative treatment experience in class and activities, Catrina declined to interact with students who exhibit exclusionary behavior by not participating with them. In class, her strategy to avoid negative interactions with the teachers is to stay focused on improving her grades and exhibit good behavior, as dictated by White norms. While she noted that this didn't mean she escaped inequitable treatment from teachers, she has had some improvements using these tactics. In order to support her need for peer interaction with like-minded students, Catrina spent as much time with her select group of peers as possible. She also used her cousin's experience and advice to help to avoid classrooms, teachers, and spaces in the school that have been known for being particularly plagued with race, gender, and class issues. Resistance and persistence are evidenced how Catrina viewed achievement as a nonracial characteristic; rejected participation in activities where she was subject to inequitable treatment; and developed strategies to deal with inequitable teacher treatment.

Catrina's story again underscored the importance of examining cultural sensitivity among school staff and addressing the lack of cultural training. Specifically, her story called attention to the lack of participation among students of varying ability in the school's extracurricular activities. Likewise, as one of Catrina's strategies to avoid the hostile elitist climate is to avoid courses with a history of exclusionary participation, an investigation into classroom culture and structure of advanced courses is also required. Lastly, Catrina's experience with treatment that she characterized as bullying or harassment by teachers called attention to discipline disparities and the need for a review of disciplinary outcomes with specific attention to learning and gender inequities.

## **My Story - Maria**

When I first met Maria, she was new to our 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom and new to our school, Mt. Pleasant elementary. Maria was light skin with long wavy hair and was very pretty. Maria lived two streets over from me and I enjoyed going to her house. We quickly became friends. She met my mother and my mother told her how pretty she was, “with,” her “long pretty thick hair.” When I met Maria’s mother, she doted on me as profusely as my mom had adored Maria. “Wanda, you are so pretty; look at those eyes. You have such pretty almond shaped eyes.” And like Maria did with my mom, I thanked her mom and gave her mom a broad toothy grin. When we were in school and our teacher would take us on bathroom breaks, all the girls in my class used that time to play. We would chase each other around the bathroom playing tag. When Maria joined our class mid-year, she changed the game. She told the girls, whom I usually hung out with that, “Wanda would be the mother, because she look you know...” Really, I did not know and I don’t think the others girls knew either. I found out being the “mother” meant that I was now the one who had to always chase them around the bathroom and the three or four of them would be my pretty daughters who were trying to escape from me. I think Maria imagined me as some sort of old maid. We all went along with Maria’s version of the game, although I did feel apprehensive about it.

One weekend, while over Maria’s house we were getting ready to play “house,” I asked her why I had to always be the mother. Maria stated it was because I was, “sort of fat plus you wear glasses.” Never mind the fact that she too wore glasses and besides my own mother specifically told me that I was not fat but rather “just a little stout.” I was about to cry, but didn’t, and I called her a “bitch” and told her that I no longer wanted to

be her friend. Then Maria, actually started to cry and told me that at least I didn't have sickle cell and further explained that because of the disease she didn't go to school a lot and was in constant pain. I had no idea what she was talking about and to be honest I didn't care. I was glad she was crying because to me that meant that I hurt her feelings the way she had hurt mine.

I never saw Maria again after that Saturday; not in school or in the neighborhood. I remember my teacher announcing that Maria was sick and that we should all think good thoughts about her. I felt bad because I knew that we had gotten into an argument the last time I saw her. I did think good thoughts about her and hoped that Jesus would help her but I also felt that she was a bitch and those mixed feeling plagued me the remainder of fourth grade.

### **My Story**

I was seventeen when I first became conscious of being Black and really trying to understand what my Blackness meant in the United States. I was in music class and my friend Dee was telling a group of us that her mom was a Muslim and was a follower of Louis Farrakhan. I had never heard of him and asked her to tell me more about him. The next day in class she loaned me two VHS tapes of Farrakhan speaking. I was in love and enthralled! I had never heard a Black man speak so forcefully against White supremacy. I didn't understand anti-Semitism or misogyny. But I knew what anti-Blackness felt like and for me—at that time—that's the only thing that mattered.

In 9<sup>th</sup> grade I was enrolled in a program for college bound students from low- and working-class backgrounds. We met on Saturdays at Cleveland State University in the Corlett building. After my class was over I was waiting on my mom to pick me up.

While I was waiting, an older White man came into the building and asked me were the toilets clean and then insisted that I was the maid. Of course, I was confused and shocked that he would think that I was a maid. I wasn't completely sure why he made that assumption about me but I knew within myself that it was tied to my race. However, colorism was my first experience with bias concerning my skin complexion. Even before I met Maria, I knew that being light was better. I remember growing up wanting to be light skin like my mom and two of her three sisters and most of my female cousins. Growing up I recall my mom jokingly commenting about our darker complexioned family members, only the girls or women, that they had their 'father's complexion.' It took me years to fully understand what the joke meant. My two female cousins and I are the darkest of the girl cousins. We all took our father's complexion. For my mother and her light skin sisters, it seems like it was an unwritten and/or widely unspoken rule that the women should date and marry someone darker but with the hope that the girl children produced from such a union would come out with light skin tone like their mothers. My maternal grandmother was very light in skin tone, what we in the Black community would refer to as very fair complexioned; she could easily pass as White. Her first husband was a brown skinned Black man and her second husband, my grandfather, was a very dark toned Black man.

My early experience with colorism both at school and out of school, especially when it came to dating in my late teens and throughout my twenties, left me feeling insecure, isolated and insufficient. Because the thing is, having the right skin tone is only one marker of feminine beauty within the African American community. Hair texture and later, after puberty, body shape play an important role in deeming desirability for the

Black male gaze. And while my mom continued to affirm my physical beauty as well as Black men whom I either dated or who were potential suitors, I lived in a world that reinforced through various media and in real life that a plump, kinky haired, brown skin Black young woman with flat buttocks was not any one's first choice.

So, when I heard Farrakhan say that, he didn't need a White woman because God had given him a beautiful Black woman and he is pleased with her! I was surprised and pleased to see that she was a dark tone Black woman. I felt in many ways acknowledged. During that time Black consciousness among my generation was at its peak. I remember listening to Public Enemy, Poor Righteous Teachers and X Clan and feeling pride in my Blackness. In fact, in my high school yearbook I wrote for my Last Will and Testament that I would leave my: "Knowledge and the love of myself as the Original Asiatic Black Woman of the Universe. I also leave unconditional love for my Nubian family."

### **My Reflection**

In my story, the vignettes illustrate the problems I encountered as a plump, brown skinned, kinky haired African American girl as well as my initial awakening to what it meant to be Black. The hardest part of the current study for me was revisiting my own issues with colorism and asking the participants about their experience with colorism. Initially, when I came up with my list of interview questions for the girls, I purposely omitted all questions regarding skin tone bias. I tried to convince myself that colorism was no longer an issue with this new generation. Of course, I was wrong; all one must do is look at contemporary R & B music videos, Hip Hop videos, television, movies and social media platforms to see that Black women whose proximity to White beauty

standards are still centered and valued the most by both White and Black audiences and this holds true across gender for both races.

It is telling that I completed my last vignette implying that the power of pro-Black hip-hop culture and Minister Farrakhan's rhetoric had in a sense "saved" me from feelings of ambivalence and perhaps even self-hatred. Yet, when I looked at the photo-elicitations from the yearbook that I used with the participants in this study, I realized that in truth it had not. The photos prompted me to go back and revisit my high school years. I recall that it was not until my sophomore year in college that I was able to process that colorism is more than the notion that darker complexioned Black women were not pretty. In fact, very little has to do with who is pretty and who is ugly. I have never felt that I was ugly. Instead, I felt devalued; that being darker meant that I was not enough and because I was not enough it meant that, I shouldn't expect more, whatever more was, and thus, by default I should accept less. This feeling of knowing that I deserved more combined with the ingrained notion that I should expect less and accept this fact plagued me throughout my twenties. In fact, it was not until my junior year in college, when I was introduced to Black women's history and Black feminist theory that I began to see myself in a more positive way; as a full human person. In the process, I learned to forgive others and myself. For me, part of healing was to forgive my mother. We talk about colorism and she has learned a lot, but my mother continues to think that intra-racial skin tone bias makes the victim feel ugly; which is not true. Instead, it makes us feel cheapened. For a long time, my mother wore the same foundation make-up as I did to confirm to me, in her mind, that I was not too dark or ugly. Never mind, that she is almost two shades lighter than me. On a positive note, she no longer refers to light skin

women whom she thinks are not attractive enough as “yellow wasted.” In the past, African Americans used the term, “yellow wasted,” to note the premium paid on light complexion was extraordinarily high and to not be deemed nice-looking was to debase the value of the person, typically a woman, for whom such a gift was bestowed at birth.

And what about Maria? Today, Maria would be approaching her mid-40s and I hope she grew up to be a happy, successful and of course, very pretty, woman who is still winning her battle against sickle cell disease. This study is for her too.

### **Overall Analysis**

The research questions used to guide this study are:

1. How do African American girls’ perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their in-school identities?
2. How do African American girls’ perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their out-of school identities?
3. What are the tools and strategies Black girls use to resist intersecting oppressions in order to persist in these environments?

The racial, gendered, and class high school experiences of the girls who participated in this study varied. Each of the participants’ stories indicated numerous institutional challenges in navigating high school and the larger educational pipeline. Communally, their stories offer important information for discourse on urban Black girls as well as for larger discussions of race, gender, and class. Thus, both researchers and practitioners gain a better understanding of how to serve, support, and improve educational outcomes for this particular group.



To analyze data and address the research questions, I used narrative analysis. The narrative theory approach allowed me to code and analyze data, find patterns and themes in the three participants' stories, and researcher's autoethnographic reflections. By synthesizing the data and answering the questions, I was able to present findings that indicate a multitude of intersectional oppressions that affect the educational experiences of inner city Black girls in predominantly Black urban public school.

This analysis is guided by critical race theory, Black feminism framework, as well as my own cultural intuition. These frameworks were used to analyze how the interplay of race, gender, and class oppressions are evidenced in girls' educational experiences, and to highlight the participants' resistance. Their three stories reveal the types of oppressions they experience as well as resistance efforts and persistence strategies. Table 3 (below) presents a short form of these oppressions along with the girls' utilized strategies.

Table III

*Participant Oppression and Resistance*

Name	Instances of Oppression	Resistance Strategy
<b>LaNisha</b>	Silencing Racial spotlighting Student/Peer racism (Racialized comments) Marginalization/Isolation (rejection/inequitable treatment) Teacher/administration racism Inequitable dating practices Student/teacher negative relationship Black male/Black female differential treatment	Parent support/lean on peers Self-motivation Positive relationship with teacher Focus on future/persistence Racial pride (role-models) Having fun-supportive network of friends
<b>Briana</b>	Marginalization/silencing, racial spotlighting, inappropriate teacher relationships, class differences, racial profiling, curriculum bias; teacher/administration racism	Focus on the future/persistence Family encouragement Positive friendship groups/positive networks Resist unfair rules/administrating of rules Remove self from “line of fire” Code switching
<b>Catrina</b>	Marginalization/Isolation, racial spotlighting, inappropriate teacher behavior, teacher/student negative relationship, Curriculum issues	Opt out of school social sphere Supportive network of peers Resist unfair rules/administrating of rules Having a fun-supportive network of friends
<b>Researcher</b>	Curriculum Bias; Marginalization/Isolation	Supportive network of peers and family; racial pride

My analysis of the girls’ and my own stories centers on the race-, class-, and gender-related oppression that we experienced, and the factors that supported our resistance and persistence in this space. Opening coding of the stories and autoethnographic reflections revealed several mentions that generated findings related to

this question. From a KWIC scan, I noted that our stories consistently mentioned bullying, harassment, teachers, administration, diversity, parents, friends, siblings, popularity, classes/courses, social media, dress code, being alone, limited choices or options, extracurricular activities, and being “called out.”

In order to group these words in a way that would allow me to better answer my initial research questions, I used focused coding. The following themes were revealed: a) misogynoir, b) student favoritism and curriculum bias c) student isolation, d) inequitable student dating, e) negative student/teacher relationships, f) positive peer, parent and close family relationships, g) social activities outside of school, and h) Black identity.

Race, gender, and class are implicated in each of these themes. The focused codes allowed me to reflect on the commonalities among the girls’ stories, and overall, these stories consistently revealed that the girls’ academic and social experiences in school were greatly affected by instances of marginalization, racism, and gender inequities. These inequities were generally reflected in the participants’ interaction with their peers, teachers, and school administrators.

## **Themes**

In this section, I discuss the following eight themes illustrated by the data: misogynoir; student favoritism and curriculum bias; student isolation; inequitable student dating; negative student/teacher relationships; class differences; positive peer, parent and close family relationships; social activities outside of school; and Black identity.

**Misogynoir.** In this study LaNisha, Briana, and Catrina consistently noted instances of misogynoir from administrators, teachers, and other students in their school. Across stories, the girls explained that both White and Black administrators selectively

punish Black girls, especially the girls that were judged to be “too loud” and “ghetto” on a regular basis. In one example, LaNisha noted that while her school marketed itself as having a program to train students to be nurses she quickly learned that the program actually was a nursing assistant program that she felt would keep students, especially Black girls who made up majority to the program enrollment, in low paying wage professions. What’s more, LaNisha felt that administrators chose the nursing aid program because they did not feel that poor Black girls either could do the work or aspired to become professionals. Teachers’ comments also indicate stereotypical views about Black girls; more than one girl relayed derogatory comments from a teacher about African American girl’s attire. For instance, LaNisha recalled that an African American female teacher constantly remarked that the way African American girls dressed was, “... not a good look” or “That’s not cute.” The teacher’s comments illustrate that the clothing and behavior they associate with urban Black culture and Black people are not acceptable in the school. The girls believe that the administrators do not only hold these stereotypes but are a standard way of thinking among various individuals in the school, including their teachers of all races.

Teachers also monitor Black female students more closely in school, with girls remarking that the same students are continuously reprimanded, while Black male students, including school athletes and popular student commit much more egregious acts, but receive no punishment. LaNisha spoke angrily about an incident involving a cell phone that actually belonged to one of the boys in her class however; the teacher called her out and threatened to punish her if she did not put away the phone which do not belong to her to her in the first place. The other girls have been victims of this double

standard; at least two recalled multiple issues with dress code violations that they felt were more related to their physical appearance than their actual clothing. For instance, in addition to the example I mentioned earlier concerning LaNisha, Catrina also felt that her teacher unfairly cited for dress code violations although the district's dress code policy had been revised. Catrina felt her teacher's harassment was directly tied to Catrina's inability to master the curriculum. This racialized and gendered monitoring results in student/teacher conflict as well as significant loss of class time for participants. Similarly, the girls note that students in the school harbor stereotypes of Black girls. LaNisha related an incident when a student joked that a dark complexion emoji was not needed because no one would be able to see the emoji because it was so dark. On another occasion, LaNisha pointed out that students nicknamed a boy "Smoke" due to his dark skin tone. Some of their peers mask these beliefs by making racialized jokes and comments both in person and via social media, mimicking perceived ghetto behaviors and even harassing students about clothing.

The girls' stories generally pointed to issues of racial profiling, using the terms "bullying," "diversity," and "call out." Their stories illustrate how lack of diversity and cultural sensitivity as the school creates an extremely hostile atmosphere for Black girls where they, along with their culture, are over-policed by school administrators and teachers, and scrutinized by peers. The racial profiling often results in rule enforcement inaccuracies, wherein African American girls are more often found in violation of school rules because of excessive patrolling of populations as well as administrators' and teachers' cultural preferences. For girls, rule enforcement inaccuracies are particularly evident and racialized when pertaining to dress code.

**Student favoritism and curriculum bias.** The girls' stories show that racism is endemic to the culture of their high school, and is shown in the school curriculum, activities, and behavior of both adults and students. Results of documents analysis indicate that while Black students are the majority in each of the girls' high school, however, only a select group of students are represented in school activities. School activities and curricula also lack cultural diversity and are Eurocentric.

Student schedules also revealed a lack of cultural inclusiveness in schools course offering. In terms of curriculum, all three the girls feel it is largely Eurocentric, with little attention given to Black culture or people. Thus, the curriculum works to exclude Black students from the classroom even while they are most of the student population. Even attempts by district level curriculum managers to bring issues associate with the Black community into classroom spaces are rejected by teachers and deemed either too controversial or not interesting. Catrina, mentioned that the head of the social studies department at her school district encouraged her history teacher to have her students participate in an electronic conference with someone who was involved in the Black Power Movement in Cleveland, OH. However, her teacher refuse to participants saying, "her students were not interested plus she didn't think that the school's technology would hold up." The teacher's response upset Catrina and some of her peers because the teacher did not bother to ask them their opinion. In another case, LaNisha felt racially spotlighted when her African American male teacher referring to a Black girl's new hairstyle noted that he once worked in a weave shop. In my own case, one of the reasons I was so enamored with Lois Farrakhan in 11<sup>th</sup> grade was because I was so hungry for some real knowledge about African American history beyond Martin Luther King, Jr. and

Rosa Parks. When I wrote my “Last Will and Testament” bequeathing my “knowledge of self” to my “Nubian Family,” for me that was an act of defiance and resistance. It was the only way I knew how to protest quietly while at the same time being heard.

It is important to note that a culturally inclusive environment and culturally responsive atmosphere are necessary not only for Black girls in this particular space, but for all student and adults as well. In order to address issues of racism and improve educational prospects for all children, it is necessary for all students to learn to respect other races and cultures.

For girls, incidents of racism range from subtle micro-aggressions in the form of questions from teachers and peers, such as touching their hair and asking if their hair is real, to exclusion during group activities or sports, to overt racist comments particularly regarding their dark skin tone and peer harassment.

**Student isolation.** Black girls in this study also recall being regularly isolated in school, both physically and mentally. Physically, their appearance is isolating because acceptance and validation in the majority Eurocentric obsessed space requires light skin and long flowing hair. Ideal body types are mixed: both thin and “thick” or full-bodied girls are accepted. Yet, while their body type is less of an obstacle, ideas of Blackness or Black hair separate them from other students. Because their appearance is not accepted or popular among the majority student population, they are isolated by peers in class, experiencing particular difficulties while partnering for group projects, and in social and extracurricular activities. This also results in spatial isolation, since, in terms of socialization, the majority students dominate the school and restrict other student to certain areas.



Mentally, the girls are isolated, culturally viewing themselves as different from the majority of students in their school in terms of activities and preferences. The girls do not prefer to participate in activities that are popular among the majority students at their school. Also, the girls' stories illustrate that, when Black girls are accepted or invited to popular groups, they are vulnerable to class-based jokes and comments that make them feel uncomfortable. This was certainly the case with Briana, who felt that student partnering was awkward because of the difficulty of being chosen by peers that do not normally associate with her. Often partnering proves to be a further marginalizing experience. In discussing the difference in her behavior in school versus outside of the school with friends and family, Briana explained that she believes there is a certain way she should act in school under the eyes of teachers and her peers that is more acceptable, but that is not necessary around friends and family where she can be free. Thus, the participants feel they cannot relate to most of their peers in the school, and further feel that friendship outside of their small, like-minded groups is prohibited because of the various forms of marginalization driven by other students.

**Inequitable student dating.** In addition, related to physical appearance as well as popularity or group status is dating and relationship patterns in the school. In this study, the participants reported that Black girls and boys have disparate experiences regarding dating in the school. However, Black students are marginalized by appearance and racial stereotypes, Black boys are better able to escape their marginalization by participating in sports. Black boys are dominant in football and basketball, which both carry a significant amount of status in the school. Thus, these activities offer a pathway

for Black boys to integrate themselves into the majority student body and maintain a certain standard of popularity.

The participants understand that their appearance, as well as their status, makes them unattractive to White males and other Non-Black males. This poses an issue in terms of developing relationships; because Black males can date interracial, there is an even smaller number left in the dating pool for Black girls, who are limited to dating Black boys. For instance, when asked about potentially dating White boys, LaNisha laughed a little and replied, “Umm, no. We just not attracted to each other. So that’s a big no.” I followed up and asked her what about the possibility of dating Latino boys. LaNisha humped her shoulders and said she never really thought about it but felt Latino boys were, “kinda like white boys who speak Spanish and love trying to act Black, so they can say the n-word.” While the few White boys in the school are more attracted to features that include long, straight hair, White or fair skin, and blue eyes, White girls are not selective in the same way. Consequently, White girls and Black boys have larger dating pools than Black girls.

**Negative student/teacher relationships.** Negative relationships with teachers also contribute to a hostile environment for Black girls. Each participant explained that they changed their behavior significantly to survive the classroom space, namely because of teacher treatment. Girls complained of being called out, bullied, or harassed by teachers in the school. Indeed, teacher treatment is often raced, gendered and classes, as teachers make inappropriate comments about students attire or appearance more consistently to Black girls. Although the comments often do not pertain to school rules, but rather teacher preference, such remarks serve to make Black girls uncomfortable in

the school space. This is the feeling that LaNisha conveyed when she said the teacher's considered her hairstyles too "ghetto" and again when Catrina stated that she felt bullied by her teacher because she didn't understand the content in the classroom and therefore she consistently cited Catrina for dress code violations.

The combination of Black girls' being both singled out and overlooked, or hyper visible and invisible to teachers, creates a disconnect between the two groups. Black girls note that they either do not trust the majority of teachers in the school, or feel that they have no relationship with them at all. This results in Black girls' isolation from the students as well as the teacher in classroom settings. The girls explain that they do not participate in class because they feel uncomfortable but note that the most critical part of the class atmosphere is teacher treatment. The girls feel that negative relationships are driven by teachers' own perceptions of Black girls or the larger Black community.

Indeed, the girls complained that even African American administrators and teachers, both male and female, made them feel hemmed up and pressed upon. This sort of policing of urban Black girls is steeped in intra-racial class bias. As both Lacy (2007) and Lewis (2017) point out, some middle-class Blacks erect exclusionary boundaries around lower -class Blacks by disassociating themselves from commonly held stereotypical Black behavior, emphasizing shared White experiences and highlighting educational and professional credentials. Historically, middle- and upper-class Blacks reinforce their social status by shifting residential locations away from high poverty communities, ensuring school quality, providing luxuries for their children, encouraging their children to assume the financial burden of Black middle-class life, and focusing on

character building. This experiences often leads middle-class African American unprepared to teach in majority Black urban communities.

**Positive peer, parent and close family relationships.** The third research question I asked in this study was: what are the tools and strategies girls used to resist intersecting oppressions in order to persist in these environments? Open coding revealed that participants mentioned parents, close family, being different, friends, good teachers, Blackness, commonalities, and social activities. In focused coding, I found that positive relations supported the girls' resistance to various oppressions and persistence in school with peers and close family, parent support, social activities outside of school, their Black identity, and their commonalities with other like-minded students.

The girls' stories illuminated that relationships with peers and siblings supported their resistance to the multiple oppressions they experienced in school. In navigating marginalization, peer relationships allowed girls to have a support group in which they felt more comfortable and could discuss or have common reflections on the issues they experienced in school. Peers allowed for more comfort both inside and outside of class; the girls relayed that in class close friends make partner and group work less awkward. Outside the classroom, close peers support girls in carving out a space in school.

Close peer groups are made of students, both male and female who are of the same race and share common experiences in school as well as similar interests. The girls explained that these groups allow them to speak with students who understand their own experiences and have similar feelings about occurrences at their school. Catrina's close group of friends consisted of peers who like herself, consider themselves queer in terms of both gender and sexuality. And Briana's close peer group consisted of students who

had a appreciation for the arts. Culturally, they also feel more comfortable with because of various commonalities, including taste in clothes, music, and activities.

**Social activities.** The participants in this study revealed that simply having fun and celebrating with friends attributed to their ability to maintain positive attitudes and survive in the space. Socializing within their peer network is necessary for students to avoid succumbing to negative pressures induced by marginalization at school. The girls illustrated that socializing with friends both within and outside of school offers a reprieve from multiple oppressions experienced there. Participants noted that knowing they have a group of friends to whom they can relate means they do not have to expose themselves to increased levels of hostility and tension from school peers.

Similarly, participants reported that they have atypical interests, and enjoy different activities from their majority peers. Social activities with their close Black peer network serve as a way for students to enjoy themselves and their interest apart from the more popular school activities. For instance, Briana enjoys art and with the help of her mom was able to secure an internship and the Cleveland Art Museum. Similarly, LaNisha not only enjoyed styling hair she has a deep interest in the business aspect of the beauty and hair industry. For her part, Catrina aspired to become a motivational speaker and channel her energy to helping others build their self-esteem. These activities also include attending movies, concerts, and group meet-ups at friends' homes, during which the girls are able to discuss issues in school and enjoy forms of culture not accepted at their school. These spaces also offer comfort to the girls, who feel that their homes, families, and clothing are not being scrutinized during these activities. Lastly, girls noted that illicit activities such as drinking, smoking, and using other drugs are popular among

majority students in their school; however, their own spaces do not carry the same pressures to participate in those activities. Thus the girls' self-created social activities and spaces allow them to maintain a level of happiness in their hostile school environment.

**Black identity.** The girls also expressed a positive association with Black culture that helped them to resist stereotypes as well as marginalization and harassment. The girls all saw themselves as college-bound and capable of achievement even though they were aware of the dominant perception of Black students as non-achievers. These positive perceptions of Blackness are encouraged by each girl's family structure in healthy relationships with parents; positive relationships with siblings; involvement with Black adults outside the family, including extended family, family friends, and mentors; and knowledge of Black history and culture. The girls' garnered knowledge of Black history and culture from parents as well as through activities geared towards Black teenagers, such as Black Greek sorority programs and summer programs at HBCUs.

The main question that guided this study was: In what way do gender and racial bias contribute to the self-perception of African American adolescent girls? The themes identified in this study highlight the variety of strategies that Black girls use to cope with the stress of perceived gendered racial microaggressions in the high school setting. This study extended the research literature on inner-city African American teenage girls in three important ways:

1. This study uncovered Black girls strategies of resistance, collective, and self-protective coping in response to gendered racial microaggressions.

2. This study illustrated the role of having a network of supportive family and friends in the stress and coping process.
3. This study highlighted the importance of racial pride and self-motivation in the stress and coping process for Black teenage girls.

The resistance coping strategies consisted of active strategies that Black teenage girls reported using to combat perceived gendered racial microaggressions and socio-economic bias.

The strategy of using one's voice as power is like other active and direct coping strategies that have been identified in the literature. For example, Shorter-Gooden (2004) found that Black women used the strategy of standing up and fighting back as a specific way to deal with racism and sexism. In this study, Black teenage girls discussed their desire to "fight back" using their voices to take back power in situations where they felt demeaned based on their race and gender. Another coping strategy that the girls in this study used was to "pick their battles." The girls in this study all said that rather than engage the negative behavior that was shown to them that they instead chose to retreat to their own space among friends who shared their world view. It was among like-minded peers that schooling for these African American girls became more rewarding.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

In this chapter, I discuss the research questions and the implications for theory and methodology, its limitations, and recommendations for future research. Last, I conclude with final thoughts on the work.

This study explored the ways urban Black high school girls cope with intersections of racism, sexism and classism in the classroom setting using an intersectional framework. The three sub questions, in this study are:

1. How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their in-school identities?
2. How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practices in which they engage inform their out-of-school identities?
3. What are the tools and strategies Black girls use to resist intersecting oppressions in order to persist in these environments?

Ironically, the same qualities that informed the Black girls in this study out-of-school identity are the same qualities that made it possible for them to navigate the

sometimes-unfriendly climate in their classroom and in the school itself. There are three qualities that emerged in this study which highlights how African American girls in this study perceived their in-school identity. Time and again, the participants emphasized that their inherent confidence in their own academic abilities would render them successful. The insistence on being academically victorious in the face of what they perceived as overwhelming hostility from teachers, administrators and peers is what satisfied these girls; it is this awareness that informed the participants' in-school identity.

Another asset that the girls in this study had was their belief in their own inner-beauty. Although they did not meet Eurocentric standards of beauty, the girls in this study never doubted their own inner beauty. In fact, in the case of Briana, she viewed her own inner beauty as a gift. Finally, the African American girls in this study were conscious of their own quiet strength. Historically women have always been the quiet strength of the African American community, so it is not surprising that the girls in this study emphasized this trait in how they perceive themselves in-school. All of the participants, at times, felt isolated at school however, outside of the school and surrounded by family and friends and seeing the pride their eyes and reassurance in their words broke the spell of disillusionment for these girls. This is what Black girls need. They need us to see them, affirm them, and love them.

This study showed that Black girls in predominately urban educational settings with majority White and middle-class Black teaching and administrative staff are heavily marginalized and both structurally and individually experience various forms of oppression related to race, gender and class inequity. Girls in these settings employ various tactics related to peer relationships, parental support, social activities, and Black

identity as a way to resist oppressions as well as survive in these spaces. The participants display a diverse set of experiences in schools, and use a range of strategies to persist, which illustrates the heterogeneity of the Black girls' experience and the need for continued study of their experiences in schools.

It is common knowledge that Black children are on the low end of an ever-widening racial achievement gap in this county. It is even becoming more widely acknowledge that systemic problems and institutional neglect, as opposed to simply personal or even parental shortcomings, lead to this problem. But, too often a large group is left out of these conversations—Black girls. Black girls are punished and suspended at sky-high rates, not pushed or guided to reach their full academic potential by teachers, who too often focus on grooming them socially, if focusing on them at all. What's more, Black girls are often labeled as having an attitude as opposed to having their needs and struggles identified and addressed. As an educator and researcher, I have seen firsthand how easily Black girls are stereotyped and isolated, and worse, forgotten. Discarded.

Tragically, within the African American community we perpetuate the denial of childhood innocence when we label little girls as “grown” or “fast” for minor things, such as wearing their hair straight, as opposed to styles we deem more “appropriate” like ponytails and cornrows. This continues through their teenage years as they discover their voices, their sexuality, and all the things that make them human. This may explain why African American female teachers sometimes harshly criticize Black girls' hairstyles and fashion.

I mentioned this earlier, but it is worth repeating, Black boys do not live in a vacuum. Black girls are here too, dealing with the same problems and more. Urban

Black girls live with the same violence and trauma that urban Black boys do, in addition to the fear and vulnerability of being female in a patriarchal society which includes the weight of being silenced, sexualized, sexually harassed, and sexually abused throughout their childhood. It is the intersection of Blackness and femaleness that creates a unique, and often terrifying, experience for Black girls.

This study is not here to compete in the oppression Olympics, but the erasure of Black girls is too common and too harmful to continue to ignore. These attitudes follow children into adulthood. Thus, a commitment to real restorative justice, not just lip service—and further, a commitment to ending the criminalization of Black children—in our schools and in our communities is admirable. But if we are to protect and empower our children, and in turn strengthen the Black communities, we must remedy the fact that these conversations leave out the needs of Black girls.

### **Theory**

This narrative study contributes to theory in several ways. Generally, studies focus on low-income Black male students in low-achieving inner-city schools. This work, however, focuses exclusively on Black girls in urban public high schools. The findings in this study illustrate the myriad issues Black girls face in such schools and pushes for further study of those policies and experiences that inhibit integration and diversity requirements. Additionally, this study offers new interdisciplinary scholarship that simultaneously addresses race, gender, and class oppressions in the educational experiences of Black high school girls. Thus, this work contributes to gaps in literature, as Black girls are a neglected area of study in both the fields of education policy and women's studies. Finally, this study advances and adds to critical race theory, Black

feminism, and critical race feminism, as it creates a knowledge that centers the lived experiences of Black girls and positions the girls as knowledge holders. Also, the work advances the importance of perspective, voice, and intersectional experiences as reflected in these three theories.

Additionally, this study is unique: it focuses on the academic and social experiences as a well as the resistance and persistence strategies of Black girls in urban high schools. This work is steeped in the traditions of critical race theory, Black feminism and examines the effects of policy decisions and complex power relations on an understudied group of students who are surviving in both a system and a school building. As a result, this study adds critical knowledge to the disciplines of education, Black studies, and women's studies.

### **Methodology**

Using storytelling as a methodology allowed for the centering of girls' voices, the empowerment of participants, and the creation of a safe space for the girls to share personal experiences with the education system. Storytelling was empowered because it required positioning Black girls who, as both Black and young, are often overlooked as knowledge holders, the main sources of data. In this way, the research process served numerous purposes:

1. It illustrated that storytelling was a transformative and empowering process that allowed the girls to represent themselves in research and address traumatic or painful experiences;
2. Storytelling provided a way for participants to take action by speaking back to the academy and advocating for change; and

3. Storytelling allowed for the collection of first-hand accounts of the education experiences of Black girls in urban public schools.

As high school girls, the participants had never been asked about their perspectives on their educational experiences; thus, the research process served as their first moment of critical reflection on their school experience and of sharing that information. Consequently, by using storytelling as a methodology, the research process gives a platform to share the voices of formerly silenced groups.

Storytelling also allows the researcher to participate in research with youth who guide the critical process of reflection and transformation. Girls are transformed in this work as they move from silenced youth to research authorities. Lastly, storytelling acts as a mode for social restorative justice by focusing on the girls' continued resistance and persistence, and by supporting their agency and self-definition. Storytelling is also an act of justice, as it pushes back against dominant frames of knowledge that critique the centering of perspective, voice and subjectivity by honoring elements of the research process as well as Black women's folk traditions (Richardson, 2003). In critical race studies and Black feminism, storytelling can continue to serve traditions by repositioning Black women and girls as creators of knowledge in the research process.

Additionally, cultural intuition (Bernal, 1998) was essential in my ability to conduct this research. It enabled greater access to participants and I built trust, formulated appropriate questions and follow-up questions, sensed trepidation in the participants and read cultural clues as well as other elements related to cultural knowledge. Cultural intuition influenced my language, behavior, and overall conduct in the research field. As a Black woman with ties to the community of study, my

knowledge and experience fueled my cultural intuition, which facilitated comfortable situations where participants shared their stories. The need for cultural intuition in this type of work was realized in various comments made by participants throughout our discussions, such as “You know how it is” or “You know feel me,” indicating that the participants felt that my position as a Black woman from a working-class community meant that I should understand their perspective, or that I had similar experiences. This also increased my ability to interpret data, which I found to be integral throughout the entire research process.

Cultural intuition enabled me to better situate myself in the field, communicate with participants during the interview process, analyze transcripts and prepare follow-up questions, analyze documents with increased attention to intersectional oppressions, and analyze results of data. To conclude, the use of both storytelling and cultural intuition created a space where both the researcher and participants could openly communicate, critically resist dominant scripts, and be empowered through the research process, all of which advance the strength of Black girls in the face of systemic barriers.

### **Practice**

This work has important implications for the ways practitioners can improve the educational experiences of Black girls in urban public high schools. This research illustrates the issues present for poor and working-class Black girls in these educational spaces. For practitioners, this research revealed the following:

1. Black girls experiences are affected by teachers’ and administrators’ lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity; thus, culturally competent educators are required to improve outcomes.



2. A culturally inclusive curriculum is required for girls to feel comfortable and fully participate in classrooms.
3. Educators must be purposeful about diversifying school activities and including all students in the school.
4. Educators need to critically reflect on their own prejudices as well as on how those prejudices manifest themselves in disciplinary actions, educational outcomes, and student participation.

Addressing these issues will help support girls as they navigate high school by analyzing the results of systemic racism, gender inequities, and classism among additional oppressions that exist within urban public-school settings.

For practitioners, it is critical to think about how issues of equity are being addressed. As illustrated in this research, students are most frustrated by the fact that, even when their issues are said to be addressed, they in fact are not, because Black children aren't included in the discussion. For example, in one of the girl's school, Black student felt that the curriculum was limited and not culturally inclusive, and students complained to the administration regarding these issues. The administration did not directly respond to the group, but instead introduced an African American History course to the curriculum. However, the class is being taught by a novice White teacher who students feel will not adequately fill the cultural void in the curriculum. Additionally, parents never had the opportunity to discuss their grievance with the administration before this solution was offered. Thus, majority-Black administration deferred to the majority-White teaching base that decided to solve issues of racism and exclusion for Black children without inclusion of Black students or their parents. This is just one

example of how issues of racial injustice are being either ignored or misaddressed in this particular school. For educators, this illustrates the need to include children and parents in problem-solving strategies.

To ensure that educators have access to this data, I plan to share the findings with the school administrators, teachers, and parents directly involved in this study. I will also share the research through conference presentations and publications in various academic and media outlets. In this way, the research beyond the study population to the larger population of Black girls whose educational experiences are affected by similar oppressions, as well as to practitioners who work in similar educational spaces.

Furthermore, I plan to conduct a follow-up study that revisits the girls who participated in this study, one that chronicles their narratives during their early college years. This continued study will further understand how intersectional oppressions affect girls over their high school careers and how their resistance strategies change and develop as they matriculate. This work, along with future studies, is vital in understanding and bringing attention to the inequities that exist in predominantly Black urban educational settings. Ultimately, increased data focusing on the experiences of Black girls and illuminating issues in these settings will push educators to create healthier academic climates for Black girls at the high school level.

### **Policy**

The findings from this work provide policymakers with important information to consider while drafting, approving, and reforming district educational policies. In districts like the ones studied, where schools are becoming increasingly segregated, it is important to consider how these policies affect all Black children, including middle- and

high-income students as well and low-income students. This consideration is critical to understanding how systemic inequities are connected to educational outcomes and patterns for Black girls.

In urban schools, teachers are charged with cultivating meaningful relationships with students and families as they are a crucial influence on student's social, mental and academic development. The first recommendation is for school districts and universities to collaborate in preparing aspiring teachers and administrators for experiences that will facilitate exposure to communities and families in urban settings. These experiences will provide background knowledge of the challenges of poverty and will provide a perspective beneficial to both teachers and administrators embarking upon a career as a secondary urban educator. Another recommendation is that district level professional learning opportunities should be afforded to urban secondary principals as a layer of support to build skill sets necessary to transform the culture, academic outcomes, and build trust amongst staff in low performing, urban secondary schools.

### **Limitations**

The following elements of the study can be considered limitations. First, the study solely focuses on the experiences of Black girls. While this is beneficial in gaining an in-depth understanding of their experience as well as centering their voice, including Black boys' stories would allow for an increased understanding of the similarities and differences related to gender in school experiences. Second, with an increasing non-White student population, it is important to understand the academic climate for all students of color. This study was limited to girls who identify as Black/African American; however, it is equally important to study the experiences of other student of

color in order understand how change can positively affect larger student groups. Finally, this study focuses on a very small sample size and a specific location. It includes three girls who attend two predominantly Black urban public high schools in a Midwestern metropolitan city. A larger study that includes girls from various districts and regions could reveal more information about the educational experiences of low-income Black girls in inner-city schools across the nation. I also understand that, for many, my subjectivity as a researcher could be seen as a limitation; however, it served as a benefit in terms of supporting my cultural intuition as well as allowing me greater access to research the participants. Thus, my subjectivity was invaluable in conducting critical and in-depth work on this sensitive subject matter.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

It is critical to conduct work that focuses on the lived experiences of Black women; they face multiple oppressions in the educational pipeline. Understanding the Black girls are not a monolith and have diverse experiences in educational spaces, it is imperative to continue research on Black girls from diverse backgrounds who are attending school in various educational spaces; such work could potentially improve educational opportunities and outcomes for this group. Based on both the findings and limitations of this work, the following are recommendations for future research:

1. A follow-up study with the same group of research participants that tracks academic outcomes and the development of resistance strategies as a way to determine the long-term effects of schooling in these urban schools.

2. Conduct a study of Black boys in the same schools to understand their high school experiences and how gender differences manifest in terms of educational experience and outcomes.
3. Conduct a study with a larger population size, targeting girls from numerous school districts and regions across the United States to find both differences and similarities in the experiences of Black girls in urban school districts, further diversifying the literature and increasing the focus on Black girls.

The proposed studies will increase researchers,' policy makers' and practitioners' knowledge of the experiences of Black girls and their ongoing resistance strategies educational spaces. These recommendations are also part of an agenda to increase existing data on this understudied population, thus furthering goals of increased educational access, opportunities, and outcomes for Black girls. This study highlights the variation in not only Black girls' experiences, but within the Black working-class. This diversity is important for educators and policymakers as they continue to research and create programs and policies for Black children.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study is a humanizing and liberating work grounded in theoretical frames, critical race theory, and Black feminism, which all help to create a transformative lens through which to situate and conduct the work. Rather than focus on perceived deficits, the purpose of this study was to give African American girls a platform to discuss their own experiences with oppression, and to speak back to research that often speaks for them and not with them. This study also affirms the inherent strength Black girls have developed by navigating the multiple oppressions of their daily lives. Creating this safe space for Black girls allowed me as the researcher the freedom to investigate oppressive, pervasive social conditions in the educational pipeline as well as to address the challenges these girls experience. In this way, the study was transformative for me, the participants, and scholarly literature itself, by offering a way for both researcher and participants to use the research process to conduct social justice work by addressing wrongs and advocating for change.

This study worked to illuminate societal issues related to race, class and gender that manifest themselves in the education system and serve to marginalize and oppress Black girls. Through the girls' stories and the researcher's reflections, the work revealed

what Ruth Brown (2009) has referred to as the ‘hypervisible and invisible’ nature of the Black girl experience in school and out-of-school. Consequently, and as opposed to a review of cultural deficiencies, this work offers culturally and politically relevant solutions to problems hampering the academic experience of Black girls. This study goes beyond simply identifying the choices Black girls make to explore their experiences and offers reasons for why decisions are made that affect their academic outcomes. The study finds are consistent with research that notes the specific challenges Black girls face in schools, including frequent citations of dress code violations, discipline referrals (Morris, 2016), and prominent angry, aggressive, promiscuous, or hypersexualized Black girl stereotypes (Harris-Perry, 2011).

The study findings work against oppositional identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), as girls identify as Black as well as college-bound, and view academic achievement as a positive trait. Accordingly, the findings oppose the “acting White” hypothesis because positive academic outcomes are more often discouraged by systemic inequity and racialized academic experiences, which results in marginalization (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). All three of the participants noted using code switching to survive in the school space, however, the participants acknowledged that acting White is not beneficial for their academic success because it does not necessarily mean engaging in positive co-behavior or behavior related to academics. Consequently, though some behaviors were seen as White, they were not necessarily academically positive. Additionally, contrary to the finding of Ogbu and Simons (1998), this study notes positive effects of fictive kinship and/or collective identity, as girls had to act collectively to survive the school space socially and psychologically. Furthermore, class issues were still present within this



social-economic group and are consistent with Carter-Andrews (2012) findings on racial assaults; the girls experienced devaluing, positioning as invisible, dehumanization via derogatory comments, and stereotyping by adults as well as peers.

However, the greatest accomplishment of this study was that it countered the silencing of urban Black girls and the master narrative. Through a research process focused on voice, perspective, are and being as elements of humanization, this work included inner-city Black girls in their full humanity, revealing that Black girls have critical insights to offer in understanding how schools work to marginalize students based on race, class, and gender. The research also illustrated the complex and heterogeneous nature of African American girls' educational experiences even within a very specific social-economic context; thus, it calls for continued research that reflects this complexity and avoids a homogenous grouping.

These African American girl stories, grounded in courage, strength, and survival, can be understood as acts of political resistance for participants. Through the sharing of their stories, Black girls have thrust their perspective into the arena of educational research despite the field's tendency to exclude those perspectives on educational policy studies research by using cultural intuition and proclaiming the benefits of my own experience in the research process. This study is a result of my commitment to my own humanization as well as the emancipation of other Black girls and women. As an academic who has and continues to suffer from similar oppressions, I feel it is my responsibility to produce work that illustrates the value of both Black women researchers as well as Black girls' voices. For education and social science researchers, it is my hope

that these stories demonstrate the importance and value of actively incorporating Black girls and women in research on experiences of women of color.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Participant Interview Question**

Research Questions:

- 1. In what way do gender and racial bias contribute to the self-perception of African American adolescent girls?**
- 2. How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practice in which they engage inform their in school identities?**
- 3. How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practice in which they engage inform their out of school identities?**

#### **Interviewer Protocol:**

- **[Interviewer:** Whenever Participants use terms that you don't understand, or that you think the reader won't understand, inquire as to what the word(s) mean.]
- **[Interviewer:** Get to know the person a bit before launching into the interview questions. Have them tell you about themselves.]
- **[Interviewer:** Throughout the interview, and as appropriate, ask Participants for stories or other examples of things that Participants talk about.]

#### **Section A. Introduction**

**First, I would like to tell you about the interview we'll be doing today. The interview will help me learn from you what it is like being a young woman in today's world.**

**These are your opinions; there are no right or wrong answers. I will respect your views. Some questions are on sensitive topics, so tell me if there is something that you'd rather not talk about. Everything you say will be kept completely confidential.**

**[Interviewer:** If Participants asks what confidential means I will supplement with the following material. What I mean by confidential is that I will not use your name on the recording or connect your name with anything you say in the interview. After I have typed out what you have said in the interview view I will destroy the recording.]

**The interview should take about an hour. If you need to take a break let me know.**

**Before we get started do you have any questions?**

**To get started, I'd like to know a little about you.**

A1. How would you describe yourself?

[**Probe as needed:** Do you prefer the term African American or Black or does it matter to you?]

[**Interviewer:** Ok, I'll use [Preferred Term] as we talk today.]

[**Interviewer:** Skip questions below as necessary if the answer is covered in A1 response.]

A2. Who do you live with? [short answer]

A3. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_ (Yrs.)

A4. Where are you currently living? Which neighborhood? [short answer]

A5. What is it like living in your neighborhood?

[**Interviewer:** If Participant just moved, it is ok to get information about the prior neighborhood in this question.] [short answer]

A6. Are you in school?

a. [If yes, ask:] Where do you go to school?

b. [If yes, ask:] Do you do activities like sports, drama, music or leadership at school?

c. [If yes, ask:] What are your favorite subjects? [short answer]

A7. Do you have a job? [yes, no]

a. [If yes, ask:] Where do you work?

A8. If you could live anywhere you wanted in the United States, where would you like to live?

A9. Is there someone you look up to, that you really admire and want to be like? [yes, no; short answer]

a. [If yes, ask:] Tell me about him/her. [short answer]

**RESEARCH Q 3: How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practice in which they engage inform their out of school identities?**

## Section B.

**These next questions ask about what you think the messages and images are of African American/Black girls your age. People get lots of ideas and messages about how girls your age should act from a lot of different places.**

**[Interviewer:** In items below, B1a to B1h, I often ask about several influences in a single item. Within an item, I do not need to know about specific sources of the ideas or images (e.g., TV vs magazines), but if this information is offered that's ok.]

**[Interviewer (If needed):** By messages I mean the ideas or themes that you hear or see around you. These messages can come from lots of other people from books, or from media or from other places. **(If needed):** By images I mean the images of what African Americans should be like. Sometimes we think of images as “pictures” or “snap shots” of what people should be. The images can come from lots of other people, from books, or from media or other places.]

- B1. What ideas and messages in various mediums (magazines, television, music videos, the Internet) about what Africa American girls your age should be like, come from and what have you learned from them? **[Read Each]** ... *(what girls your age should say or do, how they should dress, how they should act, etc.)*
- What kinds of things have you learned from TV, radio, books, or magazines about being a teenage girl? [short answer]
  - What kinds of things have you learned from The Internet, Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube about being a teenage girl? [short answer]
  - [If yes, ask:] What kinds of things have you learned from movies or music about being a teenage girl? [short answer]
  - What kinds of things have you learned from family about being a teenage girl? [short answer]
  - What kinds of things have you learned from sports figures and/or politicians about being a teenage girl? [short answer]
  - [If yes, ask:] What kinds of things have you learned from teachers, ministers and/or pastors about being a teenage girl? [short answer]
  - If yes, ask:] What kinds of things have you learned from boyfriends about being a teenage girl? [short answer]
  - [If yes, ask:] What kinds of things have you learned from friends about being a teenage girl? [short answer]

- i. Are there other people or places that you have learned about being a teenage girl from? [short answer]
- B2. Thinking about the images of African American/Black girls that come from the people, places, or things you just talked about (for example, **insert example sources from B1a to B1i**), would you say you are different from or similar to these images?
 

[**Interviewer:** If images the Respondent has presented are contrasting or contradictory, probe this issue in B2a and B2b.]

[**Interviewer:** If respondent is having difficulty answering this question, ask specifically about one source that seems central (e.g. family) to get the respondent started.]

  - a. In what ways are you different? [Longer answer]
  - b. In what ways are you similar? [Longer answer]
- B3. Tell me about any pressure you feel to be different than you want to be? [
- B4. When an African American/Black girl doesn't fit the popular image of what a girl should be like, how do other people treat her? [short answer]
 

[**Interviewer:** If Respondent has difficulty understanding the phrase "popular image" I will paraphrase it, for example, popular image means the images that the media have of what girls your age should be like; alternatively, it means the stereotypes people sometimes have of girls your age.]

  - a. Can you tell me a story about a person that you know like this and how others sometimes treat her? [short answer]
  - b. How do you think someone who doesn't fit the popular image of what an African American/Black teenage girl should be like would be treated by other people? [short answer]
- B5. If an African American girl your age is known for having a lot of sex partners, how do other people treat her/what do other people say about her? [short answer]
  - B5a. If an African American girl your age is known to be a virgin, how do people treat her/what do people say about her? [short answer]

**RESEARCH Q 2: How do African American girls' perceptions of themselves and the classroom practice in which they engage inform their in school identities?**



## Section C.

**These next questions ask about what you think about your school and classroom experiences.**

- C1. In school do teachers, other students and/or principals consider African American/Black girls too loud? [yes, no]
  - a. [If yes, ask:] Do you consider yourself “loud” [yes, no]
  - b. [If yes, ask:] Is that a good or bad quality?
- C2. Generally speaking, in school are loud African American/Black girls considered smart? [yes, no]  
  
[If no, ask:] What makes these girls thought to be less smart than Black girls that are considered “quiet?”
- C3. What makes a good student leader? [short answer]
  - a. Who shows more leadership in school, boys or girls? Why?
- D4. In order to improve the overall school or classroom experiences of girls like yourself would you focus on changing:
  - a. How girls behave in school
  - b. How teachers act towards girls
  - c. How girls act towards each other
- C5. Thinking back to when you were in elementary school, do you think you were a classroom leader? If so, how? If not, then why?
- C6. Do you consider yourself a school or class leader? How so or why not?
- C7. Do you think teachers are tougher on Black girls or Black boys when fights or other disruptive activity occurs at school? Why or why not?
- C8. Which teachers are tougher on Black girls:
  - a. Black females
  - b. Black males
  - c. White females
  - d. White males  
[Interviewer: follow up question by asking the Respondents for examples.]
- C9. Overall Black girls in school are (fill in the blank) \_\_\_\_\_

**RESEARCH Q 1: In what way do gender and racial bias contribute to the self-perception of African American adolescent girls?**

**Section D.**

**These next questions ask about what you think about yourself in terms of physical beauty.**

[NOTE: The majority of literature regarding skin tone preference purports that an overwhelming preference for or attraction to persons with light skin tones has existed in the African American community since the days of slavery in the United States. It has been assumed that this favoritism displayed towards persons with lighter colored skin has instigated negative behavior as well as unhealthy attitudes regarding self-worth and ethnic identity. The purpose for asking Participants these questions is to examine the relationship between skin tone preference and self-esteem, ethnic identity attitude, and the Participant's own skin tone within the African American community.]

D1. Describe your skin tone:

- a. Light
- b. Medium
- c. Dark

D2. The skin tone of a pretty women is:

- a. Light
- b. Medium
- c. Dark
- d. All are equally pretty

**[Probe more: ask why Participant thinks this way][short answer]**

D3. I wish my skin tone were:

- a. Light
- b. Medium
- c. Dark
- d. I like my skin tone the way that it is

**[Probe more: ask Participant why she thinks this way] [short answer]**

- D4. It is more difficult to find a boyfriend if your skin is:
- a. Light
  - b. Medium
  - c. Dark
  - d. It equal for women with various skin tones
- [Probe more: ask Participant why she thinks this way] [short answer]**
- D5. Do you feel that you are a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others?
- [Probe more: ask Participant why she thinks this way] [short answer]**
- D6. What are your top three qualities?
- [Probe more: ask Participants which are their best qualities and why?] [short answer]**
- D7. Do you think that you are pretty?
- [Probe more: ask Participant why what she thinks are her best physical features] [short answer]**
- D8. Do you like your skin tone?
- [Probe more: ask Participants which are their best qualities and why?] [short answer]**
- D9. Does your female peer group consists mostly of:
- a. Light skin women
  - b. Medium skin women
  - c. Dark skin women
  - d. A mixture of all three
- [Probe more: ask Participants do they choose their friends based on skin tone?] [short answer]**
- D10. Do you think there is too much or not enough discussion regarding issues of skin tone among African American women? **[yes, no]**
- [Probe more: ask Participants why they feel this way] [short answer]**

D11. How do African American males contribute to the perception women have about skin tone?

**[Probe more: ask Participants to explain their reasoning and provide examples [short answer]**

D12. How do Whites contribute to the perceptions women have about skin tone?

**[Probe more: ask Participants to explain their reasoning and provide examples [short answer]**

D13. The issue of skin color within the African American community:

- a. Is a new problem
- b. Has been occurring for generations
- c. Is not an issue at all

D14. Which group is more genuine in their support and/or dedication towards the African American/Black community?

- a. Light
- b. Medium
- c. Dark
- d. It equal for women with various skin tones

D15. How can skin color preferences can be resolved/eliminated? **[yes, no]**

**[Probe more: ask Participants to explain their reasoning and provide examples [short answer]**

**TURN OFF RECORDER AFTER COMPLETING THIS SECTION.**

## **V. Conclusion**

Okay that's all the questions I have today. I want to thank you for your help and for talking about your experiences and opinions. Do you have any final questions or comments? I'd like to mention again that we keep all our information confidential. Okay, thanks again.

## **VI. Post-Interview Data**

After the interview is over and you've left the respondent, spend a few moments dictating the following thoughts **into the recorder**.

Label it: Final Comments by: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Where was the interview done?
2. Give the date, day of week and time of day the interview took place.
3. Provide a verbal description of the respondent's appearance—apparent maturity, physical appearance, articulateness, etc.
4. Were there other people present other than the interviewee? Explain any third voices heard on the tape. Explain any interruptions. Explain anything unusual that happened during the interview.
5. How comfortable was the respondent with the interview process?
6. How honest do you think the respondent was?
7. Did respondent display any emotion that you think needs further explanation?
8. How comfortable were you with the interview? Did you have any emotional reactions to respondent that might have colored how you did the interview?
9. Mention any observations of things that might make the comments on the tape more clear—anything you noticed that you think may not have come through on the tape.
10. Mention any thoughts you have about this interview compared to others you have done. Is there anything that you want to take special note of?
11. Reflect on the content of the interview. Give any analytic thought you have. Does this have a lot of new info in it? Or is it the same as others? Any internal contradictions in your own interview you noticed?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Personal Testimony Writing Prompts**

Dear Participant:

As part of your participation in this study, I am asking you to write your own personal story. Writing a personal story will allow you to share parts of your lives with me that we missed in our interviews. What's more, writing your personal story will allow you to gain a better understanding of your own history and goals for the future. I want to point out that this is not a school assignment, therefore I am not expecting you to write perfect sentences or use perfect grammar. I want you to tell your own story in your own voice and the way that you want to tell it.

To help you get started writing, here are a few things that I would like you to write about:

- 1) Birth Information
- 2) Family
- 3) Friends
- 4) Your Neighborhood
- 5) Your Hobbies
- 6) Goals for the Future

Have fun with this project and really think about these different aspects of your life and why they are important to defining who you are.

The face-to-face interviews will be spaced two days apart. You will need to turn in the personal story during our second interview.

Again, thank you for agreeing to participate in this study!

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent Form

#### Gender and Racial Stereotypes and Education-Related Beliefs on the Academic and Social Identity Development of African American Girls

Dear Participant:

I, Wanda M. Shealey, a doctoral student in the Urban Education program at Cleveland State University, am asking you to participate in a research study for my dissertation. The reasons for the interviews and the personal stories are to gain your opinion about certain parts of gender and racial biases as they relate to both your in-school and out-of-school self. My goal is to do the interviews during the month of August 2018.

The contents of this study may be printed or may be published. The study exams how schooling impacts urban Black girls' behavior when they are in-school and when they are out-of-school. As part of this study, you will participate in four separate interviews with me, the researcher. The first three interviews with each participant will last two hours and will take place in each participant's home. The face-to-face interviews will be spaced two days apart. The last interview will be done by telephone and take about one hour. A brief written personal story will be required. You will need to turn in the personal story during the second interview. The directions for writing the personal story will be given to you on your first interview. This study will require 7 total hours of interview time.

There is payment for being in this study; each participant will get a \$50 Visa pre-paid gift card at the end of their involvement in the study.

The risks in this study are not very many. You might have some minor concern from sitting in one place for more than one hour and being interviewed and some of you may have some embarrassment in talking about racism and sexism. Should applicants feel anxious during this study, they can speak with me off the record and/or talk to a person they trust, such as a parent, relative, friend or religious expert. If more help is needed, the Mobile Health Crisis Hotline is available 24 hours at 216-623-6888.

Your agreement and participation are entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any of the questions that I have or may choose not to participate at all.

Interview responses will be treated in a confidential manner, as I, the researcher, will be the only person that knows the responses came from you. Your name and other identifying information will not be revealed with the data collected, but rather a label of "Participant (followed by a number)" will be used to lessen the risk related with breach of confidentiality.

For further information regarding this research please contact me, Wanda M. Shealey, at (216) 480-████ or by email at █████@hotmail.com. My



research is under the direction of Dr. Brian Harper, Associate Professor in Curriculum & Foundation Department at CSU. He may be reached at (216) 875-9770 or by email at [B.HARPER1@csuohio.edu](mailto:B.HARPER1@csuohio.edu)

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A copy of this Informed Consent will be provided to you for your records.

Please read the following: ***“I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.”***

There are two copies of this form. After signing them, keep one copy for your records and return the other one to the researcher.

Your signature below means that you understand the contents of this document. You also are at least 18 years of age. Finally, you voluntarily consent to participate in this research study.

---

Signature

---

Date

---

Name (Printed)

## APPENDIX D

### Eight Photo-Elicitation Images

Harper (2002) explained that individuals respond differently to images versus text: “The parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information” (p. 13). Therefore, photo-elicitation researchers are able to elicit not just more information, but different and more reflective information from participants than could be rendered through traditional, verbal-only interviews. In this study the researcher used images from a school year book to help participants better reflect on certain moments during their high school journey.







## APPENDIX E

### Briana Riseman's *Silent Scream*

Artwork for her Personal Story

